MEMPHIS BLACK HISTORY
INTERVIEWS WITH MRS. MARIE FORT

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MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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TRANSCRIBER: BETTY WILLIAMS

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PLACE Memphis, TN

DATE February 13, 1990

Marie Fort

(INTERVIEWEE) Mrs. Marie Fort

Charles W. Crawford

(For the Mississippi Valley Archives of the John Willard Brister Library of Memphis State University)

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THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS MEMPHIS BLACK HISTORY. THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MRS. MARIE FORT. THE DATE IS AUGUST 23, 1989. THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS BY DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW I.

DR. CRAWFORD: Now, we want to hear something about your childhood, Mrs. Fort and what you remember about that time.

MRS. FORT: I wasn't nearly as old as she is when I remember. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, we want you to start at the beginning. You were born in 1904, weren't you?

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where were you born?

MRS. FORT: Here.

DR. CRAWFORD: Right here in this home?

MRS. FORT: No, on this spot.

DR. CRAWFORD: In this home?

MRS. FORT: No, I had this home built about 10 years ago.

DR. CRAWFORD: But right here on Speed Street.

MRS. FORT: On this spot. My kids were born on this spot.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did your parents live in the old house?

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you grew up right here where you are now.

MRS. FORT: Right here.

DR. CRAWFORD: Eighty some years later.

MRS. FORT: Yes. Eighty-five and one month.

DR. CRAWFORD: What day was your last birthday? July?

MRS. FORT: July 30th. And I had a nice party. This lady, Sue, and a lot of other people gave me a beautiful birthday party. I enjoyed it. I was little that day. I was very young that day because they only had five candles on the cake and they made me feel real young.(Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: Who were your parents and what do you remember when you were very, very young?

MRS. FORT: My father was James Amos Johnson. My mother was Ella Ricks Johnson. She was from Alabama and my father was from Georgia. They married when my mother was fifteen and my father was thirty. There were only fifteen children. I am the youngest. My father used to say you are the last pea in the dish. (laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: How did they happen to come to Memphis? Do you know Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: Yes, a man went to Alabama and asked them to go to with him and he was going to give them a home in Mississippi. My mother took five of the children she had. She had six. She took five and they got on the train and went with the man to Mississippi. When they got there she found it was a plantation and my father would have to be in the field at four in the morning. She would have to be there at six although my sister who was five months old would have to stay with the other children

while my mother went at six.

One night they found out the only way they could get away was to run away. So he told her one night if I take you and the children I might not make it. But there is a place called Memphis down the river. I'm going. So he left one morning and just as he left they came looking for him. My mother told them that they had just killed him because she thought he is surely going to die.

Then the next morning she took those five children and walked until she got to a house. They used to tell it often. When they got to this house, there was a lady there who had a lantern and she carried them down to the river and told them to lie in the weeds. When the boat came along, she flagged the boat with this lantern and they got on and came to Memphis.

When she got here my father had been here three days I think. When she got here, she was on Front Street. They used to call it Front Row. That is what my daddy would say. He would say it was Front Row. He was there looking for her. When she came up with those children, he told her he had a house for her, come on. He had a house for her in Binghampton and they walked with those five children all the way to Binghampton.

DR. CRAWFORD: That must have been ten miles or more.

MRS. FORT: I don't know. It was on Scott Street where he carried her. But they had no money. They walked there.

DR. CRAWFORD: He had found a house in three days . . .

MRS. FORT: Three days and that is where they went to live on Scott Street in Binghampton. One day I had another

brother born on Scott Street and then my sister born on McLean. I used to look at that house that is torn down now. There is a school there. My sister was born in the house on McLean. My mother had heard about some property for sale over here. She and a lady were coming over and you had to get under a wire fence. I think they called it Lea Woods or some kind of woods. My mother was afraid of snakes. When she went to get under the fence, she saw a snake and she fell. This is a term you would never understand. Her hand fell on four bits.

DR. CRAWFORD: Four bits? What was that?

MRS. FORT: A dollar.

DR. CRAWFORD: My goodness!

MRS. FORT: She came on over and there was a man when they walked down this street--they were really looking for a market guide--when they got down on this corner there was a man out there and a lot of people out there and he was selling property. His name was E. E. Meacham. He told her, "I'm selling property, you've got a chance." She gave him her four bits.

DR. CRAWFORD: That she had found when she saw the snake.

MRS. FORT: That's all she had. That is what she paid on this place was that money. She didn't have a receipt? My father got angry when she got home. "You know we don't have any money. I'm not working." You see, he taught school in Nashville and then he went to Alabama. Well, he couldn't get a school after that. He was arguing about it. She didn't care. She went to that market garden and worked and I think she made $2.00 and paid that down.

There was a house over here [and] there was a man named H.C. Elison who was a contractor.

DR. CRAWFORD: The one just north of yours?

MRS. FORT: Right next door. Across the street where our park is there was a man named Billy Burrows. He was a contractor also. Mama went to them and said she wanted a house built. They told her, "All right." When they built the house, there were only just boards. Everybody around was raising Cain about this house being made of boards. They didn't want it in the neighborhood because it would make their houses look bad. These people built it anyway. A man named Rev. Smothers of Smothers Chapel Church which was named for him had a petition that she couldn't move in here with five children in these two rooms made of boards. But she moved in anyway. Before it was over she had bought this place and two or three others down the street--one at 801 Alaska--she and my father and my brother and 803, 746 Claybrook. She had bought a lot of houses. They bought a lot of property on Vollintine up there where the library is.

DR. CRAWFORD: They just worked and bought this.

MRS. FORT: They both worked and bought it. Down here at 738 Speed they gave that to my niece. At 740 Speed was to my nephew. They just bought a lot of property. She said she didn't see anything else to do with their money and that is what they did.

DR. CRAWFORD: She worked and made that money?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. She and my daddy. He got a job after that. They worked and they raised us up that we

were not allowed to eat at anybody's house.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you were the last of the children?

MRS. FORT: And we were not allowed to eat at anybody's house. We couldn't even take a drink of water. I think it was because the people didn't want us to live here with all those kids. But she built a better house than any of them before it was over. She gave it to me. When it burned, I had another house right next door here and I moved in that. Then I had that torn down and built this one. But I'm home.

DR. CRAWFORD: This is your place and always has been, hasn't it?

MRS. FORT: Well, once I lived up the street. When I was 10 I moved up there at 738 because that was a big house and had two stories and that is where I lived until I married. After I was married, I moved back here. I came back home.

DR. CRAWFORD: That is wonderful that they were able to come here with nothing and start working and accomplish that much.

MRS. FORT: That's right. They did it.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had a lot of inspiration there in your parents.

MRS. FORT: Well, you know what my mother used to say to me and I tell this to people all of the time. When I was a little girl, if you were a little black girl and you went to school, the teachers did not allow you to be in any of the concerts, you could not take up any of the wraps. You couldn't pass the books. You'd want to be in front and do these things. But they didn't let you do it. I would sit in school and they would pass me on because my father would teach me. I didn't have

to learn from them. I got promoted three times.

But I would want to be in the concerts. This is funny. This little girl--she was a little mulatto girl--with hair way down here. They were in a play about a fairy and I wanted to be a fairy. My teacher said, "You know you can't be in this."

I came home and told my mother. She said, "Listen, you are a little black girl and in this world if you want to succeed you've got to do five times more than the brown girl, ten times more than the little mulatto girl and hundred times more than white girl and you'll make it." (Laughter) I believed her and I did it.

DR. CRAWFORD: What a good lesson.

MRS. FORT: That's what she told me. I did all I could to succeed. If I was in school, if I didn't make "A" I was sick. I had to get "A" every day in my subjects. I can read a book now, and remember everything about it. That's the way my father taught me.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had a wonderful teacher. He had taught school before he came here?

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: I'll bet he came to Memphis in the 1890's before there were any cars at all.

MRS. FORT: I don't know, but there were no automobiles because we first had a surrey. You don't know what that is. You weren't born.

DR. CRAWFORD: Horses pull it though, I'll bet, don't they?

MRS. FORT: We had a white horse named "Judge". It used to be on the corner right back over in there. Every

evening we would go for a ride. Then my brother when we would get home would tell me the story about Breman. It was about this man who had one horse and he would work him all day in the field and make him drive out in the evening. But the horse found a place called "Bremen." When all the animals got fat they went back and they wouldn't go back to their masters. We'd take this ride and then when I got ten my brother bought a car called an "Overland". You never heard of that, did you?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes ma'am, I have.

MRS. FORT: Well, that's the only one I had ever seen. When I got fourteen he bought me a Ford.

DR. CRAWFORD: That would have been about 1918 just after or maybe in World War I.

MRS. FORT: It was 1919, I think it was when he bought me the Ford car. I married in 1926. My son was born--he is up there at the top in the middle--in 1928. In 1929 I had twins. In 1930 my daughter was born and in 1931 I had triplets. and in 1932 my baby girl was born. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: You had a house full of children even then.

MRS. FORT: No, I didn't. You see the twins died and the triplets died. But I had other children. I had adopted Marguerite before I married. About two months before I married, I adopted Marguerite. That was my first child and my most famous child. Then the two girls next door who are dead now I adopted them. This lady across the street had eleven who stayed at my house all the time. They still call me mama.

A lady down the street, Mrs. Parker, had six and they are

mine. Well, all the kids. . .

DR. CRAWFORD: You adopted your first child when you were twenty-two or younger.

MRS. FORT: No, I wasn't twenty yet.

DR. CRAWFORD: You were younger.

MRS. FORT: I was younger. When I adopted her, you see, her parents were about the age I am now. Somebody gave the child to them. And they didn't know how to handle her. I said, "Give her to me." And they did and I'm still glad I am her mother.

DR. CRAWFORD: You were never afraid of being a mother, were you?

MRS. FORT: No, I always wanted to be. You see, when I was small--do you see how dirty my windows are? I don't wash windows.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have children around?

MRS. FORT: No, I don't do windows. When I was a child, every Saturday morning, even if it snowed, I had to wash windows. And I would have to take a brush and some lye water and wash the floors. And I said when I get grown, this won't happen again. I got grown. We used to have to set the chairs out in the yard and put their legs in this tub of lye water and your hands would just wrinkle up. You would have to scrub those chairs and then put them in a tub of clean water and dry the chairs. It meant something and dry them off. Well, I would line these chairs up.

I've always heard music. Honest, I've always heard music. After I would line the chairs up, we had a lot of fruit trees all

the way across the backyard. You know the limbs would wave and the band would play and these would be people in the chairs. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: What a wonderful play world!

MRS. FORT: I would dance.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you would hear music.

MRS. FORT: Honestly, I would hear the music. I would just dance. Then, so that the people out here could see it, we weren't allowed outside of the yard. So if my mother was gone, I'd get out here and dance from here down to the corner. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: The other people couldn't hear your music, could they?

MRS. FORT: They didn't hear, but I did. (Laughter)

Then I would dance all the way back across the street and dance in the yard and look to see if my mother was looking. And if she wasn't, then, if I was. . . I had never heard of ballet, but that was what I was doing. Then, I would stand out there and tap. Oh, I was a great tap dancer. I would tap and people would say, "Who taught you to dance?"

I would say, "I did." And I would just dance that way two or three times and it would be so hot out there. People would say "You are going faint little girl." I wouldn't stop. I would dance until my mother would probably wake up, then I would come back in the house and sit down and fold my hands as if I had done nothing. (Laughter)

I liked music so much and dancing, I would go to church with her. When they sang, I would dance with my hands. If anybody

blew a harp (mouth harp) I would dance.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where did you first learn about music?

MRS. FORT: I would hear it out there. Then, Ms. Minerva would come here and play the piano. My brother would play and I just started playing whatever they played. I would play it too.

DR. CRAWFORD: You could hear it and then you could play what they played.

MRS. FORT: Exactly what they played, I would play.

DR. CRAWFORD: Wonderful!

MRS. FORT: I did that for years. Then I started training bands and training children to sing and dance. I had a big dance school. We danced in all the theaters--The Handy Theater and the Palace Theater. Mr. Barrasso loved for my kids to come. If he couldn't get a show in town, he'd take my kids. It would be a better show.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was Mr. Barrasso?

MRS. FORT: Ensalmo Borasso. He knew me and my kids well. He would call me [and ask], "You've got a show for me?"

DR. CRAWFORD: And no one gave you a class in it, did they?

MRS. FORT: No, I didn't need it.

DR. CRAWFORD: You learned yourself.

MRS. FORT: I would see these people dancing and I would say that is nothing. If they did a dance and I would go to the show, and I would see them dance on the stage, I would tell him that I could do that better. He would let me get on the

stage and do it back stage the next day.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Barrasso?

MRS. FORT: Yes. And when my kids were growing up, they could walk in that theater anytime. They didn't have to have any money--my own kids--they could just walk in there. Because he thought that much of them. He would tell them, "Well, And I show a show next week and I don't have such a good show." He'd put my kids on. And then Nat D. Williams would call them the "Terrific Tots." I made them dance on skates, dance with jumping ropes. We did every kind of thing. With my dance group we did beautiful acrobatics. People would send for us out of town too.

DR. CRAWFORD: You would travel for programs.

MRS. FORT: Oh yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where was your school, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: In the home that burned down.

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes. How many children did you teach at a time, usually?

MRS. FORT: I had eighty children in the last class, but I would take them in two divisions. But when I would put the show on, I would carry everybody. I had white and black kids, Mexicans. I had everybody. People would see my kids dance and they would say, "Mrs. Fort, would you take mine too? I would tell them to come on, yes. "

If my house hadn't burned down, you would see the pictures of all of the kids because they acted together and had pictures together, and it was just wonderful.

DR. CRAWFORD: I wonder if the Barasso family might have some.

MRS. FORT: No, they didn't have any pictures. They were at the theater. My own children's pictures--great big out in front of the theater--when they were going to appear. That was my three.

DR. CRAWFORD: One of the Barrasso--Tony--[phone rangs]

What was this neighborhood like then, Mrs. Fort? When did they get the streets paved? I'll bet they weren't paved when you were a girl.

MRS. FORT: Well, I'll tell you, when my boy was eight months old, is when they paved the streets. He was born in 1928--May 27th. That's when they paved this street. When I was a kid, they used to have people from the workhouse in the streets working the streets and have shackles on their legs.

This is a thing that happened that I will never forget. One day they were out there. My mother was sitting on the porch looking. I used to get under her chair. She had a great big chair. I would get under the side of that chair between these two things in the back and sit and read a book. Because she would say, "Don't sit idle--do something. If you say, I've got my work done, find something else." I'd have to find something else, so I would get a book and read it. These men were working and I got up and came in the house. I saw a man come through running with those shackles on his legs. When he looked up and saw me in the back door, he pushed me inside and ran in. We had an attic. He went up in that attic. Some more men came behind him with guns and they were trying to find him. They heard the dogs back there in the next yard. And they went over the fence looking for him. They didn't ask me anything because I was about eight or nine, I

guess.

They went over the fence looking for him. I heard somebody back there say, "He went that way." He hadn't gone that way. He was up in our attic. My mother had no idea that this man was in the attic. So when they came in, and we got ready to eat and Mama was saying to my father (she called him, Mr. Johnson). She said, "Mr. Johnson, do you know a man got away from that gang today. They never did get him."

I said, "He's in the attic, Mama." (Laughter)

And it frightened her almost to death. My father went up there and said, "What are you doing up here?"

He said, "I came to this place looking for a job and they arrested me and put these shackles on me and wouldn't let me get away." So he told my daddy where he came from and he said you can call my people and they will tell you I just got here that day. So my daddy cut these things off of him and gave him a dollar. That was a lot of money. He gave him a dollar and said, "You go wherever you will, but don't ever come back here again."

After I was married and had three children, I was sitting out on my porch in the other house. A man came up and he said, " When I was young, I was working out there in the street and I got away from them and a little girl let me in the house."

I looked at the man and I said, "What is your name?"

He said, "Carl Reiner."

I said, "I let you in." (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: You had grown up since then.

MRS. FORT: I had three kids and a gang of other kids. I told

him, "I let you in."

He was surprised and he gave each one of my kids a dollar. Your father gave me a dollar. I haven't seen or heard of him since, but I was glad that there was one thing that had happened to a person who had good luck afterwards. I got a chance to meet them afterwards.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did your father meet him or was he dead then?

MRS. FORT: No, my father was dead. He died before I was married.

DR. CRAWFORD: In the nineteen twenties?

MRS. FORT: Yes. I think it was 1923.

DR. CRAWFORD: How much longer did your mother live?

MRS. FORT: Seven years after he died, she died. I can remember once my mother said, "If Mr. Johnson dies, I will not live long." You know they told her he was too old to marry since she was only fifteen. And she did marry him and had all of these kids and got along fine. She was able to go back to Alabama and tell them, "I'm doing fine." When my uncle, William Guess, wanted to give me a home, I said, "I can't take it." You see, she didn't allow us to take anything.

He said, "Well, I've got plenty."

I said, "Well, my mama has too." I couln't take it. Well, he called her.

He said, "Why can't this child receive a home from me?"

She said, "When I was there, you people said I would never have anything with this old man. Well, I've got plenty for everyone of mine." So they gave me this [home].

DR. CRAWFORD: This has been home all the time?

MRS. FORT: This has been home all the time.

DR. CRAWFORD: What did you play when you were a child? What games did you play or what toys did you have?

MRS. FORT: We had dolls made of china--little hard china dolls. I had the kind that you take ropes and cut them in two pieces and I would cut and brush this rope down to make hair and put ribbon on it and I would put dresses on it. Then we would take paper dolls and do the same thing. We would cut them out of catalogs and do the same. One thing we used to do was get out in the yard. You know how these children talk about rapping now. We would get out in the yard and you would rap and dance yourself crazy rapping. I don't like the rapping now because it is not concise.

We used to say this thing about: "Went to the river and couldn't get across. Pay five dollars for an old gray horse." We would say that one. It would be about 20 of us out in the yard doing it. Then each one of us would dance--see which one could dance the best to this rhythm. Then all of us would dance at once together. People used to come and watch.

Another thing I used to play the piano a lot. When they built this subdivision over here people used to drive by the house and listen. You would see cars just lined up with people listening to my music. One of my little friends who lived on the next street had a tenor horn. But I called him over and I said, "We are going to have a band."

He said, "We are!"

I said, "Yes, we are going to play in a band." The boy living down the street named Gus Haney could play drums. I could beat him playing drums, but I let him do the drums and I played the piano. The three of us would play. Did we draw a crowd! We did that for a long time and then we began to go around and play for people. Finally, I called another young man from down the street until we had seven members in our band. We played once for J. P. Alley--you know the one who used to draw all those comics.

DR. CRAWFORD: For The Commercial Appeal?

MRS. FORT: Yes. We played for the Snowdens. I think some of them are still living.

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes.

MRS. FORT: I played--J. P. Alley. I played for the Galloways. Whenever they wanted a party, they would call me. "Can you play for our party tonight?" They would have all of these people there. When we went to the Snowden's, they had a black floor and a white piano. It was most beautiful with white chairs around. And we played that night. It was one time when you people couldn't dance. (Laughter) You'd be jumping up and down. I got up from the piano. I said, "Look, we are going to do it like this." I took Moses Beaseley and we danced and we showed them how. We said, "We didn't want anymore of that jumping to my music." (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: I'll bet that was the best party that season.

MRS. FORT: It was. Everybody would try to learn then. When they called me again, they would say, "Come on now

and show us how to dance." I would show them how to dance and they would.

DR. CRAWFORD: So you had your dance school and then you taught people when you played.

MRS. FORT: No, just those people. I didn't teach the others, but they were just jumping up and down like chickens. It made me mad. (Laughter)

ANOTHER VOICE: She had a nickname too.

DR. CRAWFORD: What was your nickname, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: When I was born, I was very small. My brother put me in his hat and people would say, "What's that you got?" and he would say, "Mosquito." So when I got six, my father said I was too big to be a mosquito and that I was a skeeter. When I got ten he said I was Skeet. They call me that yet.

DR. CRAWFORD: They call you "Skeet."

MRS. FORT: My sister still calls me that.

DR. CRAWFORD: The people who call you that have known you a long time.

MRS. FORT: Yes. My sister still says "Skeet" and one of my nieces still says "Skeet." But everybody else calls me something else.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you have a streetcar line out here on Jackson?

MRS. FORT: Yes, we did, but it stopped down here at Watkins or rather it was Mansfield. They had a great big high hill of clay. The conductor would get out of the car and turn the switch on top of the car.

DR. CRAWFORD: The cable?

MRS. FORT: He would take it loose and go around back and put it up on the thing and he could start back the other way. That's the way the cars were then when I was a child.

DR. CRAWFORD: It went from downtown out to the hill and would turn and come back.

MRS. FORT: I guess when I was about sixteen when they extended it out further. It used to stop down here. I remember when my little boy was a baby that is where they stopped. That is when they first put cinders or something out here on this street. You know we had boardwalks. This is something you never heard of. They had great big wide boards and that is what you walked on.

DR. CRAWFORD: The boardwalks were your dance floor then? You liked to tap on them, didn't you?

MRS. FORT: I had to get barefooted. (Laughter)

Lots of times we had splinters. We used to go to the circus. This was a funny thing, when there was going to be a circus in town, my mother would get up early that morning and cook then she would get us all and we would go down here to Decatur Street to the Circus ground. You could walk around all day. They would have a great big tub of lemonade and everybody could drink all they could for a nickel. Everything was in this same tub. And they would have great big pots that they would fry fish in. You could eat all the fish you could hold for a dime. We used to love that and then we would go and see the parade go out. When the parade would come back in, they would start the side shows. Then at 12 o'clock they would start the big show. That was the

greatest fun of my life. But once, my mother couldn't go and she sent me with a lady who lived right across there named Illa Harris. She sent me and my niece with this lady. When we got there in the side show, they were doing this thing called walking the dog. Well, the lady up there was not walking the dog to suit me. So I walked the dog.

DR. CRAWFORD: Now, will you tell us what that meant?

MRS. FORT: It was a dance.

DR. CRAWFORD: I thought it was.

MRS. FORT: You would jump way back and then you'd come up walking the dog. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: How old do you think you were when you walked the dog for the circus?

MRS. FORT: I was nine years old exactly. Because it came out in the paper. (Laughter) I walked the dog and they put me up on the stage and told me to walk the dog up there. And when that band would play, I would walk the dog. (Laughter) When it was over, this man said, "Come on little girl, I'm going to give you an ice cream cone." Well, I was crazy about ice cream , but I was afraid to take it because my mother, you know, if you took anything, she would just half kill you. My daddy didn't do anything, but my mother would just tear you up if you took anything from anybody. So I couldn't find Miss Illa, and I said , "I can't find the lady who brought me."

He said, "She is back here."

They put me up on the trunk thing way up high. I couldn't

get down. I was way up there. A storm came up and people would come and look at me up there and say, "We are going to keep her."

And he would say, "Yes." Then he took me down again and they did the song. Walking the dog had a song. "You get way back and snap your fingers and don't you linger or something." And I could sing. When I would do it I would sing. Then I would come up walking the dog. Well, they brought me back down again to walk the dog. and I did. Then, he took me up in his arms and carried and put me way up on that thing again. And they would bring animals through there and I was still sitting upon this high thing and a storm came up. I wanted to go home and they wouldn't let me go home. I started crying. There was a lady named "Black Mary." She was a good looking woman and she was black and dressed beautifully.

Someone had told my mother that I was missing, and she had fainted. Miss Mary came in looking for me. When I did see her, she was back in the back with two policemen. She called them a bad name and she said, "I know they have her in here some place, because people say they saw this child dancing here."

When the policemen came through, people started running, but they took me down. And they said, "This little girl was lost, and we put her up here." I had been up there for a long time. They would bring something to eat there and I wouldn't eat it because I was hungry, but I was afraid to take anything. I knew if I got home my mother would kill me if I had said that I had eaten anything.

DR. CRAWFORD: You could walk the dog, but you couldn't eat

anything.

MRS. FORT: I couldn't eat anything from anybody. None of us could.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was one of your first public entertainment times, wasn't it?

MRS. FORT: I think when I was out here in the street, dancing up and down the street was when I really entertained and when they were taking me to Church Park Auditorium to entertain the people.

DR. CRAWFORD: Now, tell us what Church Park was like and what Church Auditorium was like.

MRS. FORT: It was just a long building there on Beale Street with a big long stage. They would put seats in there at times for people to sit in. It wasn't beautiful, but you know it was neat. I would go there to sing and dance or whatever they wanted me to do, I would do it.

DR. CRAWFORD: I believe that would seat 2,000 people.

MRS. FORT: I don't think that many could have gotten in there. But it would be crowded. When they started the Cotton Carnival I was co-chairman with Calverta Ishmael. I saw the queen of England being inaugurated or crowned on television. I did the Cotton Carnival--Cotton Makers Jubilee--with the children. I had them just like the coronation. It was beautiful. Then I would put on the shows. For the March of Dimes I was chairman for 35 years. Every year I would put on a big fashion show. We would raise about $2,000.

There was a little girl who used to come from Chicago. Her

mother used to dress her to be in this fashion show. Once when they were going to come down, someone ran into their van and it burned up and she was killed. That little girl dressed like Jackie Kennedy. Everything that Jackie Kennedy wore her mother would make it for her. She would come down and be in this fashion show. I had it every year at the Hotel Men's Improvement Club. I think that's what they call it.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was every spring, wasn't it?

MRS. FORT: Yes. No, it would be around in January when they were going to have the mother's march, because you see, I was chairman of the mother's march.

DR. CRAWFORD: Early in the year?

MRS. FORT: Yes. This was the March of Dimes. I would put on a big show with my children. My son's band would play. That is my son right there. That is his dad on the corner. I trained his band. He had the best band any place. He died. He had his band up in Ripley, Tennessee playing. Going home that night he fell in a sludge ditch. When they called me and I got there, he had turned gold all over. I sent for a doctor and I said, "What can I do for him?"

He said, "Just love him for the rest of your life." He said, "I'll give him a shot so you can get him home."

I did get him here and put him in the hospital. He lived three days after I got him in there. He told his daddy to take me home because he said, "I'll see you in the morning." A young man who used to play with him had a father who owned the Kon Tikki. Well, my son taught him to play, and he was playing in my son's

band. He called me that Saturday morning. I was getting ready to go out there, but the nurse called me and said, "Don't come out here, your son is doing fine. He's had his breakfast and everything." So I said I wouldn't go. Then, this young man called me and said, "Mrs.Fort, you know I love Bill Jr., don't you?

I said, "You know I do. He is my son!"

He said, "He's been everything to me and has taught me everything I know. And I've been here with him since 5 o'clock this morning. You know God loved him so much that God took him." That nearly killed me.

DR. CRAWFORD: It was a nice way to tell you.

MRS. FORT: Yes, I wish he hadn't told me. I wish he hadn't told me. That boy really loved me. He thought his mother was pretty. Can you see that?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, we can believe that.

MRS. FORT: He would say, "Look at my mother." Isn't she pretty." But I still have my two girls. And on my birthday, on that Saturday, I didn't know I was having this party.

DR. CRAWFORD: Surprise!

MRS. FORT: She came and brought a cake--a beautiful cake--with five candles on it. My daughter always brings my breakfast in the morning because I have been sick a good little bit now. She came in the door and said, "Mother, here is your breakfast."

And I said, "Okay," and reached back my hand and I saw a little boy run in and I knew that little boy lived in Gary,

Indiana. (Laughter) And it was my other daughter--the daughter from Gary--Sue had sent for her and I didn't know it.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was a surprise party.

MRS. FORT: It was wonderful. She came and brought her sister-in-law and her niece and her daughter and her grandson. They are all up on the wall. She brought them and that was a lovely birthday.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have never been alone, have you? You have always had people who loved you around.

MRS. FORT: I've never been alone. I've never been lonesome. I don't have time. When Mrs. Fowler had a notice in the paper once that it was a few little lines. She says, "We want some people to come down to Church Park Auditorium. We are going to start the City Beautiful [Commission]." I don't know exactly the words that it was in. So I went across the street where my sister lives now. You know Helen Barnum. Helen Barnum was married to Otto Johnican. She was living there. So I went over there and said, "Helen, they are going to have a thing called City Beautiful and we are going down."

She says, "Well, I've got to make bread before my husband gets home."

I said, "You make it real fast because we are going. We don't have but one hour."

We got down there and when we got there, there was Norene Honesty, Mr. [Luke] Weathers' mother (I can't think of her name.) Helen Barnum and two other ladies and I don't know who they were and Mrs. Fowler. She started City Beautiful that day and gave us some seeds to plant. I want you to know a few years later my boy

won first place in the essay contest. We received it at the Peabody Hotel, but we went to the kitchen. We received it in the back where they keep the flour and all that stuff. The Chief of Police was there and the principal of his school and the principal of Manassas School and Professor Hunt.

DR. CRAWFORD: Blair T. Hunt?

MRS. FORT: Yes, we were all there. Blair T. Hunt was sitting on a barrel of flour and he said, "I'm sitting on a powder keg." (Laughter) But they gave him the prize, but he had to be back there in that place to get it.

People said, "I wouldn't let my son take it."

I said, "I made him take it, because he earned it. And I want people to know that we were in the kitchen of the Peabody Hotel and they haven't had a chance to get in there."

One year when I was working with an organization--not anybody's business--what it was they told me to go to the Peabody Hotel to meet some people. I dressed--I have another dress I put on sometimes--I put on that dress and went to the Peabody Hotel. When I got to the side door, a man said, "What do you want here?"

I said, "You aren't the person," and I stepped inside. He was following me just walking fast behind me. I turned around and I said, "I don't want you." Well, the man that I went to meet, I had never met him. He figured I must be the person and he walked up to me and said, "Come on." He carried me up to the room and his wife was there. This man came and opened the door and said, "Don't you linger in here too long."

I said, "This room is so ugly, it is not as pretty as my house." (Laughter)

Then, they sent me to a hotel across the street. I've forgotten the name of it. It was on Main Street. It was a little old hotel. They sent me over there and I did the same thing over there twice. But they were not as nasty as the Peabody was. Finally, when my children started dancing, I want you to know that they sent for my children (my students) to dance at the Peabody Hotel. I love people. I don't care who people are. I love them because if you hate, you feel bad inside. You look at this person and you hate and you are mad and this person is happy. I love to love people. That's the way God wants it. You see I am not afraid to die. I've got an aneurysm. I'll get a pleasure that some of you may not get in a long time.

In fact, I told one man, I knew he wasn't going. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, your life has been happy all the way through.

MRS. FORT: Beautiful, yes. I've had a good time living.

I've had some struggles. I've had a hard time. When my husband got sick and he was away for two years in the hospital I had to take care of my kids and all the other kids up and down the street. But I had an air rifle. I would go out and shoot birds up in the trees. We would boil them and make dressing I had a mulberry tree. It is still out there. I would make a great big mulberry pie. The kids and I everyday we would eat. We would get wild greens all up and down the street. They used to grow wild. We ate and we were not bothered. Then, somebody came and said that I could get a book (it wasn't food stamps). It was

a book where I could get meat. Well, I never did care for meat, but I would get it for the kids. I got that until my husband came home. I called them one day and told them my husband was home. They said, "Well, you don't have to stop." But I said, "I want to stop because you know, I think about Mama and she would have been mad plenty."

DR. CRAWFORD: You never forgot what she wanted you to do, did you?

MRS. FORT: I'll never forget.

DR. CRAWFORD: Even after she was gone.

MRS. FORT: No. We had to do things. All of us did something. My sister inspected beauty shops all over Tennessee for years until she resigned. One brother was a printer--C.B. Johnson, Printer. He used to be on 220 Hernando Street. He printed for all the schools and businesses and things here. My other brother, James, was a doctor and a lawyer. All of us were busy because Mama didn't allow us to sit around and do nothing. "Get busy," she would say. "Get a book," or "get a pencil, or do something." I appreciate that. The only thing I don't appreciate is she used to whip me. I didn't like that and I don't like that today. I do not whip children. I think you wanted to spank one,one day. I dared her. That child will love you if you teach him and not beat him because there is no brains back there. (Laughter).

When I was teaching we had a teacher's meeting in Arkansas. Wherever they would call me, I would go.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was that when you were a dance teacher?

MRS. FORT: I was a dance teacher too, but I taught school also. I went down in Arkansas to teach and it was pathetic. Some of those people would take a cotton sack and cut it in half and they would make two holes in the bottom. The boy would wear that with a string around his waist. The girl would wear the top and she would draw it up across here. I bought clothes for children down there and I would take up clothes and carry to the children down there. The principal told me one day that I had to stop teaching there because I had children stealing. I asked, "How is that?"

He said, "You are going to get a letter." And sure enough I got a letter from the Board. She said I had the children stealing because I had taught them to read and write and now they were grabbing everything they could get. And that was Mrs. Sailes. When the Superintendent sent for me I went on to Marianna and she says, "All of you Forts steal."

I said, "Look, Mr. Fort was Chairman of the School Board here and he was a Justice of the Peace, but I was not born a Fort I was born a Johnson. I am going to be a Johnson-Fort until I die, but if teaching children to read and write is going to make them steal they better get a lot of stuff because they are going to do a lot of reading and writing. At the time there were no desks in the school. They sat on benches out of the church. There were no blackboards. They had one little piece that they nailed on the wall. Believe me they filled that school with desks and blackboards. He said when I get you good teachers, you don't want to stay. You don't have anything down here. You've just got

pieces of books. They didn't have books. I would carry books from home here to try to teach those kids.

DR. CRAWFORD: When did you teach, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: I started in 1934 when my boy was small.

DR. CRAWFORD: Times were hard then. That was in the Depression. Where did you teach first?

MRS. FORT: St. Anthony's Catholic School. They had nuns there, but I taught with the nuns. I did that for a long time.

DR. CRAWFORD: What grade did you teach?

MRS. FORT: I started in the second grade, but I ended up teaching the eighth because the teacher who was teaching the eighth grade didn't know the math. They asked me to take the eighth grade. Then when they put the high school there they asked me to teach in the high school. And I did and I enjoyed it. In fact, I enjoyed making all those costumes for the angels at Christmas. You know, our children became angels at Christmas time. I enjoyed making all of those robes and things. I taught dancing there.

DR. CRAWFORD: I'll bet you had a fine Christmas program, didn't you?

MRS. FORT: Oh, yes. We had lovely Christmas programs. We put on shows at Manassas High School. We put on there the "End of the Rainbow" which was lovely. People were calling from everywhere saying won't you bring that show to us. Because it showed two kids whose parents had died and they were looking for gold because they told them it was at the end of the rainbow.

When they went to the circus we had a real circus. We had real clowns. We dressed them. Then when they got to a gypsy camp we had everyone like gypsies. Everybody danced like gypsies. They had on gypsy costumes. When they went to Mexico the Mexicans had Mexican costumes. Every place they went looking, people looked exactly like that. We had a gypsy wagon on the stage.

DR. CRAWFORD: What a lot of work.

MRS. FORT: Well, the students at Manasses made with boards put together and painted. We had a gypsy lady there and we had this boy who went to the gypsy to sing, "In a quaint caravan there's a lady they call the Gypsy." He says, "She told him his dreams would come true and they didn't, but I'll go back again because I want to believe that gypsy." The girls came on when he said, "I'll go back again because I want to believe the gypsy." They came and stared at him. And he says, "Because I know when she tells me this time, the dream is gonna come true." Then the girls danced to show them what dreams could come true and they did a gypsy dance.

But we gave so many shows even the Cotton Carnival when we had parades. You know the song about the money tree? We had these little pull wagons with trees in them. Some of those kids right out here and have children, and we had this money tree with paper play money on it. We had the kids with little bags on their sides. Like money might have grown on them, we had some money pinned on them in places. Then they were picking, like they were picking money off these money trees, but they were dancing. Then,

when they would stop, this group and the band would play, they would dance to the song, "Money Tree."

When they had that thing about the Candy--not the"Candy Man"-it was another thing about candy stick or something. We had a great big thing that rugs come in. We decorated it like a stick of candy and had that setting out in the little wagon. We had the children dressed as candy. Then when the "Music Man" came, all the little girls had on skirts with a music scale and notes on it. They went down the street in these and the little boys had on their shirts with notes on them. The boys had saxophones.

DR. CRAWFORD: Someone did a great deal of work. Did you get parents to help you make all the costumes and things?

MRS. FORT: I wish they had.

DR. CRAWFORD: You did that at school?

MRS. FORT: I did it here. I would sit up all night some nights doing this. One lady right here on the back street, Lucile Patterson, now she would help make her children's costumes, but nobody else would help.

DR. CRAWFORD: You are just surrounded here in the neighborhood of people you have taught and helped and brought up, haven't you?

MRS. FORT: I loved them and they are doing things. I said, "Whatever you do, come back and tell me." I've got musicians who come from California, New York, to come back and tell me what they are doing on Mother's Day. They come to see their parents and they come to see me because I am Mama Fort that

day and I love that. But I've always said, "Whatever you do, come back and tell me. Because there's a young man out here now, who is an imbecile. He wanted to read. You know I do "Each One, Teach One. I call over there. Mrs. Johnson says he is unteachable. But he came back again. He can read as well as you.

DR. CRAWFORD: He did learn?

MRS. FORT: He's reading right now. He'll come to you. I'm going to show him to you some day real soon. He'll come by and say, "Want me to read for you? I can preach now." Because I always teach him the Bible. He can read.

Another young man stayed across over there. He couldn't read anything, but he had been in the penitentiary for six years. When he got out he saw me teaching people. So he came across the street one day and said, "Could you teach me to read?"

I said, "Sure."

He said, "What do you charge?"

I said, "I don't charge anybody anything. I just want you to stop being a fool." (Laughter) I taught that man to read. He joined Bellevue Baptist Church and he became a minister. His last name was something Bleu. I can't remember his first name right now. He became a minister. He gave me a watch. I have it right now. He paid a $125 for it. I told him that I couldn't accept anything for teaching.

He said, "This is a gift to you." And he gave it to me. I've never worn it. It is still in there because it was such a gift. The man is not going back to the penitentiary--he is a

minister.

DR. CRAWFORD: You've changed some people's lives, didn't you?

MRS. FORT: I hope so. I hope he is as good inside as he appeared outside. You know you never know.

DR. CRAWFORD: But you hope.

MRS. FORT: I hope.

DR. CRAWFORD: Your students that you have taught, do they keep coming back to see you?

MRS. FORT: Yes, there's Hubert Sandridge. Have you heard of him? He's on the school board. He's a minister. He's got a big church. I even taught his mother.

DR. CRAWFORD: Two generations.

MRS. FORT: Fred Brown, who was principal of LaRose School. I taught him. They say I raised him because he stayed at my house all the time. Then, his children grew up in my house. Jean Brown--has another name now--she was principal of Klondike School for awhile. She's retired but she still goes to this church up here. Bill Atkins, do you know him? I taught and raised him. You see his people were working. They were nurses and doctors and ministers. There was nobody at home. So Georgia brought him to me. I would just keep Bill like I did the rest of the kids.

The other night on the radio, he was saying, "I heard you had been sick, darling. You know when you made me go to school, did you have to whip me."

I said, "I fooled you with the switch. I didn't hit your body. But I fooled you because I carried you every day."

He didn't want to go to school, but I made him go every day. He couldn't miss a day.

DR. CRAWFORD: How early did you start going to school?

MRS. FORT: I was nearly seven. But my father was teaching me at home because I've had a heart condition. Then, when they carried me to school, I just kept going up. One reason why, I left school. One of the teachers hurt my feelings before a lot of kids. When I got home and told my mother what she said to me, my mother became awfully angry and started to go, but my sister said, "You stay here. I'm going to that school." When my sister got there, this woman was so frightened, she stood like this and she turned as white as a sheet. But she didn't think a child as black as I was, should have been sitting among the children who were quite as black as I was. She made some terrible remarks about I looked like I had been baked.

You don't know what it was in that day! If you were not a real black person you couldn't stand those who were because it made you look small. You could not be in concerts. But I took children down there in Arkansas right out of the cotton fields dressed them up beautifully and put them on the stage and we won five first prizes in the talent contest of the schools. I let them see what those children could do and they did it. They come back to me too. One boy is a pharmacist and another one is a big name what he is. He takes wood or stone and anything and he makes it into something. He doesn't call himself a sculptor. He calls himself something else. I can't think of that name that he has called himself.

DR. CRAWFORD: But people like his art?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes! It is beautiful art because you tell a child there are things that nobody else will do and you can do. Somebody has canned, but they won't. You can find out that thing that you can do that others won't and they'll do it. I find them around thinking up something that they can do.

Julian Bolton and his mother and his aunt were students of my dance class.

DR. CRAWFORD: What about the park across the street? You were always interested in the neighborhood, but how did that happen?

MRS. FORT: Well, these kids out here didn't have any place to play. I had been up to City Hall arguing with them about putting something out here for these kids. They won't make promises. They'll just sit and stare at you. I know Barbara Sonnenburg--she's sweet--but I said, "One day I want everybody's address. I don't have a swimming pool. We don't have a park in the area, so I am going to bring my kids over to your house and we are going to swim."(Laughter) They didn't believe this. They didn't believe I was going to do this. I called one lady and I said, "I'll have a bunch of kids and I'll be at your house tomorrow."

She said, "Look here! I am trying to do something about this." (Laughter) Now, I won't put her on the spot and call her name, but she was a lady. I named the kids I was bringing. She said, "I am really going to help you with that."

I wasn't really going, but just to let her think I was

coming. I got home and I said why don't I get my own park for these kids. So I went to City Beautiful. You know I was one of the first people to join it. I went to them and I said, " I want to put a park in my neighborhood for the kids."

He said, "We don't know if you can."

I said, "I know we can because there is a vacant lot across from me that we could use."

One of the ladies said, "You have to give us a good reason why you want that park." This was when they were down on North Main.

So I wrote this essay telling them why I wanted the park. We won! I went up to Mr. Luttrell's office. He gives out the property and I told him I would give him $300 for his lot because I wanted to put a park there. He said, "Well, all right."

I said, "I don't have the money."

He said, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "I'll call my sister." So I called my sister and she gave me the money. Then they charged me $30 more for a title search. I knew those people were dead. I'd known those people all my life, but they did that and gave us the go ahead. I got this lady across the street and a man next door, who is dead now, and I went out to a lumber company (Chandler Lumber Company). I said, "I am building a park and I don't have any lumber and I don't have any money and I need some lumber."

He says, "I won't haul it for you. You get somebody to haul it."

So we came back and I got a man who said he would haul it. So we got this man to haul the lumber over here and he built this little thing back there. He didn't do a good job. The lady across the street and I made the benches. Mr. John kept the park clean. He would cut the grass and do all of that. We had a fence and one man was helping us build a fence, but they put him in jail. I don't know why. He was a real nice person. He was Irish and just as kind as he could be. They just put him in jail.

He told me, "I am being too friendly and they are just taking me off the street." And they put him in jail. He came by here one day week before last. He came in and said, "I'm not free yet. They sent us out and I was going to come and see you." So he came in and hugged and kissed me and said, "The park is looking good." I never did know why they picked him up. It wasn't any of my business, I guess.

ANOTHER VOICE: Wasn't there a story about a quarter or a nickel that you and your sister found that had to do with that park?

MRS. FORT:: No, the idea was that I wrote the essay to get the park. There was my mother who found money to buy this property where I live.

ANOTHER VOICE: Tell me about that.

MRS. FORT: She was coming across a field. I think they call it the Lea Woods. Coming through the fence, she saw a snake and it scared her and she fell and her hand fell on four bits. She came over here and this man named E. E. Meacham was over here. She paid him that four bits down on this place.

There was no house here. It was mostly woods here. He said that is good high ground. Water doesn't rise there and you people get in there and he called it Klondike after the gold region in Alaska.

DR. CRAWFORD: Oh yes, I did not know how it got the name Klondike.

MRS. FORT: He named it. I asked him when I got to be a big girl I asked him how he gave the name. He said, "After the Klondike region in Alaska. He named that street over there Alaska. This street was Lula. And it is a funny story why it is not Lula and it is a funny story why that street over there is not Malcolm and why this street here is not Johnson any more. It is Jackson. There was a racial story why they changed the names.

DR. CRAWFORD: From Johnson to Jackson?

MRS. FORT: It used to be called Pidgeon Roost Road, then they called it Old Raleigh Road and then they said they would change it to Jackson. But there was a black man who was the mayor for a minute.

DR. CRAWFORD: About 1916, I think.

MRS. FORT: He was mayor for a minute and they found out that his name was Malcolm and so they got rid of him and changed that name. His wife's name was Lula. So now this is Speed Street. (Laughter)

I've had a good time growing up in Memphis because I have had friends among all kinds of people. A lady named Mrs. Goldclang had a store and she had some children and a girl my age named

"Fannie." She would come and get me to sit with and talk with Fannie. She did not allow Fannie to talk with any of the other girls around because it seemed they were fast. I would go and sit and talk with her. There were some Jewish people down here named Wolfe. They had three daughters, Esther, Sarah and Jenny. They didn't want me to play with the Goldclangs. And the Goldclangs didn't want me to play with them. They didn't want me to play with the Engelbergs. But we all played together.

When we were growing up and we were going to fight, maybe the Engelbergs and I would fight (with words) this week. (laughter) And the next week, it would be the Wolfes and next week it would be the Goldclangs. But we stayed friends all through the years.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had a lot of good friends in the neighborhood.

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, I loved them all. Until the Camps down here, they were our first friends. Joe Camp and all of his brothers and sisters they were grown up people. They grew up with my sisters and brothers--my older ones. I opened a beauty shop. I needed some money. (Laughter) I needed some money real bad. So I went down to this beauty college with no money and when I walked in there, this lady, who was very nice, I spoke to her and told her I wanted to look around. She said," All right." So I picked up a book on physio-therapy. This I had wanted to know because you know I love anatomy. I picked it up and I said, "I know this book."

She said, "Why don't you come into my school?" You see, my sister was the beauty school inspector for Tennessee.

So I went in and they gave me a scholarship because I was

going to help teach the others and I did. After I had gone there awhile and had really learned, I went to the board and I made straight A. They said to go home and open a beauty shop and train some of these girls and give them a job. I came right home and Joe Camp was an old man then, but he loved me. I said I don't have a building to open a shop and he said, "Go around there and get that building. It's vacant." It was his building.

I fixed it up beautifully. He came by and said, "I didn't know you could do this to this building, but Skeet, I knew you could do anything." After I fixed it up, I gave him a massage and then everybody came for a massage. At first, they wouldn't turn the lights on. They said I couldn't have a massage and beauty salon there. I said, "I'll tell you what the Bishop is going to come down to the opening and we are going to have that. If I have to light a candle and take a fan and fan we are going to open tomorrow." So they gave me the license. And I didn't have any money, but I got the license. But I opened up and I had a opening there. I worked for a long time in that business. I trained a lot of girls in that and taught them to massage.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you always have people to help you in that business?

MRS. FORT: Well, the W.O.P.C. sent eight girls to come in and help. They paid them; I didn't.

DR. CRAWFORD: And to study to learn.

MRS. FORT: These girls had been in homes--Tullahoma and places like that. They sent the girls to me. I trained them. One became a manager out here that this big store that they

used to have where the food stamp office is now. She became a manager out there. Those kids grew up to be fine people because somebody had to give them an incentive. I had a principal down there in Arkansas who used to say to kids, "You're not going to be anything but a cotton patch person." This would make me mad. I said, "Professor Boone, if I should call you that, these are going to be people after awhile."

I took the students in his school, who were just poor cotton patch people and made them the proudest. Because when we put on those shows for that rally of all the nine schools in the district we got five first place prizes and two second prizes. That was in spelling, reading and acting--singing, dancing and all. We got the first five prizes.

I went to him one day and he used to say, "Good Lord, and good devil." I said, "When you get ready to die, I want to be there because I am going to be the devil. God is not going to be there because he doesn't want to come where the devil is." (Laughter)

He died here in Memphis and I was sick at the time and I didn't get to go. I told my husband, "Professor Boone is kicking out." He said, "If you don't stop that." (Laughter)

But his wife loved me. She had known me long before he did.

ANOTHER VOICE: Tell about the time when you were very young you used to go to polls when it was time for voting.

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, what about voting when you were very young?

MRS. FORT: When I was young they would come around with cars and pick up a lot of people and take them to different polls. They would vote at every poll. That was to keep

the city administration in. You couldn't get anybody else in because they would get all these people. Then they would take them to a house right back here for one place and they would make spaghetti in big tubs and they would serve spaghetti and whisky and people were falling out dying. They came one day and asked me if I was going to vote. I said, "No." "Why not? They said, "I can vote you."

I said, "You won't ever vote me. I am going to be my own woman."

Well, my husband was working for this man. He came down and said I want to put some whisky in your barn.

I said, "The day you put whisky in my barn is the day that I am going to put a pistol in your mouth. I am not going to disrespect my race, my neighbors, my children with your whisky."

He said, "Well, I'll fire your husband."

I said, "Go on and fire him. He'll get another job."

So he fired him and I got him a a job at the railroad. (Laughter) I did. I got him a job at the railroad.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had friends everywhere?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. I got him a good job at the railroad. And that was where he was when he died--with the I.C. railroad. He was retired.

DR. CRAWFORD: What railroad was that?

MRS. FORT: The IC. You know I have a pass. I can ride any time. I got a letter from them telling me I haven't used the pass in three years. I don't want to go any place. If I go now I go in a car because the trains are cold now.

They don't have heat. If it is cold, there is no heat and if it is hot--no air. I don't want to ride.

DR. CRAWFORD: I believe our tape is about over. We appreciate this so much. Could we talk with you again, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: Oh, I'd be glad to talk.

DR. CRAWFORD: You know things about Memphis we would not hear any other place.

MRS. FORT: There are people here who know the things I know. In my childhood there were four societies--The Tabernacles, Chickasaws, The Pall Bearers, and the Calanthees. In the summer these groups separately gave picnics at Olympic Park on Vollintine where we now have the school and the library. There was a big covered platform where they always danced and children skipped to band music.

One organization at a time would hold a big parade on a certain date. Everybody would rush to Claybrook Street to see the parade go by. They were beautiful parades at the end. Children would make it to the park to skip to the music from 3 o'clock to 5 p.m. The kids would have to leave while grown-ups danced the night away.

THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS "MEMPHIS BLACK HISTORY." THE DATE IS SEPTEMBER 1, 1989. THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MRS. MARIE FORT. PRESENT IS MS. ANN KNOX. THE INTERVIEW IS BY DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW II.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mrs. Fort, could I ask you first if you remember one of your neighbors who died in the early 1950s and lived around on Mansfield Street? His name was Tom Lee.

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, I knew him.

DR. CRAWFORD: What was he like?

MRS. FORT: A very nice man. His little grandson used to be here all the time. His little grandson and another boy who lived up the street here used to play. My oldest children were very small and they would come to play with my baby. They were big boys around thirteen and fourteen, but they would come to play with my babies. They were real nice kids. He was crazy about his grandchild. In the end the little boy turned out bad.

DR. CRAWFORD: Is he in Memphis now?

MRS. FORT: I don't think so.

DR. CRAWFORD: Does Tom Lee have any children living?

MRS. FORT: No, I didn't know him to have but one child and I didn't know if that was a boy or a girl. I just knew his grandson.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you remember the grandson's name?

MRS. FORT: I believe his name was John. I don't remember exactly. That could be wrong because I've had so many children.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you hear what Tom Lee did on the river?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, I knew when he did that. You know how we, millionaires (laughter) go out on the boat to ride. Well, the boat was sinking and Tom Lee used to have a boat down there and he was just riding back and forth and he went back and forth to that boat and saved quite a few of those people.

DR. CRAWFORD: He saved 32 people's lives.

MRS. FORT: Yes, there were a lot of people that he saved with that little boat of his.

DR. CRAWFORD: And he was one of the greatest heroes that Memphis has.

MRS. FORT: That's the truth. To my knowledge he is the greatest. You know when you save a life you've done great things.

DR. CRAWFORD: He saved so many lives.

MRS. FORT: It was like you have a grain of corn and you plant it and it grows up and a lot of ears come on that stalk. Think of the people he saved and how many people were born to them later. So he saved more than 32.

DR. CRAWFORD: He certainly did when you think of it that way. One of the ladies he saved was the one who married the man named Dixon and they loved art and that is why we have Dixon Art Gallery today. So you see the influence of one man, Tom Lee, has affected Memphis so much. And he was one of your

neighbors?

MRS. FORT: Yes, he lived right around there on Mansfield.

DR. CRAWFORD: What happened to Mrs. Lee after he died?

MRS. FORT: I never knew Mrs. Lee. I never met her. In fact, I think nobody hardly knew her. You know, she was very quiet and homely.

DR. CRAWFORD: And he worked for the city too, didn't he?

MRS. FORT: Yes, he did.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you remember when he died in 1952, I believe it was?

MRS. FORT: I know when he died. At that time I was in Indiana, I think, when he died. I wasn't home then.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have had a lot of fine neighbors here.

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. People in Klondike used to be very nice, but we got some out here now who don't care for themselves or anybody else. That's why the sheriff and I have so many arguments. I tell him these things and he pretends he is going to do something and he does nothing.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, Mrs. Fort, can you tell us some of the obstacles you had to overcome? You must have had some difficulties and yet you have been so successful.

MRS. FORT: I've had a hard time living, just to tell you the truth. There were a lot of times where I tried to get children into different places. We could go to the Zoo when I was a kid once a year on a Thursday. The principal of our school got that done. When we went to the Zoo, we played on the slide and the swings. The next day the newspapers were full of things

that ugly people said. That we were monkeys and that we ran up the trees and that monkeys locked the caged doors to keep us out and all of that stuff. Being a child when my father was reading that to me, I said, "Who said it?" My father told me who said it and I called the newspaper and I said, "I saw you in the cage when I was at the Zoo." My father grabbed the phone and hung up. (Laughter)

He said, "You are always too forward. You are too smart." But I had to say something to somebody about it, you know.

DR. CRAWFORD: You just did not accept injustice, did you?

MRS. FORT: I never did.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were you a girl then?

MRS. FORT: Yes, I was a little kid around seven or eight.

DR. CRAWFORD: Who was your principal who got the Zoo open?

MRS. FORT: Professor J. M. Jones. He was a nice person. He got it so we could go just once a year. A few years later he got it so we could go once a month. I didn't want to go because I said, "If I can go only once a month, why should I go. I've seen one monkey and talked to another." I got a terrible whipping for saying that, because my mother said you shouldn't call a grown man a monkey. But I was talking about the telephone call I made that day.

After that, he tried to make it so we could go once a week. We could go on Thursday, but if that was a holiday then we couldn't go. We'd have to wait until the next week. We just had the NAACP and a lot of people fought that and some people were arrested because they went to the Zoo anyway. I was in an organi-

zation then that would say whatever it is, let's do it. Then that organization--well, I won't call the man's name--he went to the Zoo and was arrested. They went down to bail him out. We were waiting at a place for him to come back. They had to go down and get him out. He told them he wanted to go to the Zoo so his little children could see things too,as he was a taxpayer. He was keeping the Zoo up and he felt he could go to look at the animals. It didn't hurt to look at the animals. We could go but the children couldn't play on the things. We could just go and look.

DR. CRAWFORD: Black people were paying taxes and that was part of the park system.

MRS. FORT: I know that. Well, you find people like that now. If there was a movie with a black person in it, you couldn't show it in Memphis.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Binford was the censor.

MRS. FORT: Mr. Binford was the guy. I've called him. I'm sorry, but I did. I called him and I asked him, "Who made his brain?" I said, "I know God didn't do it because he made everybody and He didn't make anything foolish."

He said, "Who is this?" And I told him, but he hung up. I never heard any more from it.

DR. CRAWFORD: He censored all the movies that you saw in Memphis for a long time.

MRS. FORT: If it had a black person in it.

DR. CRAWFORD: [There were] other things he didn't like too and thought they couldn't show. All the movies in Memphis were censored during that time.

MRS. FORT: Yes, they were. There was one movie that I carried some children over in West Memphis to see. I don't know what it was now. It was a real good movie, but you couldn't show it in Memphis because there was a woman in it who was not a maid. I can't think of the name of it. He was a crank.

DR. CRAWFORD: It was a black woman who was playing some role besides a maid?

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: And they couldn't show it here?

MRS. FORT: Couldn't show it here.

DR. CRAWFORD: I have read about those days.

MRS. FORT: Do you know when they had the Chamber of Commerce that was supposed to be a big thing for white people? This man came to my door one day. My husband did not have collectors or anybody coming around. Well, he came here one day and he wanted to know if I wanted to take out any insurance with him. I said, "We have insurance, but my husband mails the money in." He got to looking at the children, and I had kids singing.

He said, "This is nice if they were little white children."

I said, "They'd be crazy because if you look in here you are going to see some." Because there were two white women in here with their children. "If you look in here, you are going to be surprised." He looked in and he saw them. He started back out the door and I said, "Wait, you are going too fast. When you get to the Chamber of Commerce, tell them that I said they sent a fool

out here trying to sell me insurance and he is prejudiced. Tell them not to send you back."

About that time a man came along from L. B. Price. I had called them and told them I wanted a lace tablecover. This man came out here and brought me a red cotton cover. I said, "I didn't ask for that. I asked for a lace tablecover."

He said, "Niggers don't eat on lace. They eat out of pots." And he named the kind of pots they ate out of.

I called L.B. Price Company and told them what he said. "Now, if he comes back out here, you are going to haul him away because he made me mad and I have people here, and I don't want to hurt him, but if he comes back out here and people aren't here, you are going to have to pick him up." I think they fired him, but I never did buy anything else from L.B. Price. They went out of business because I told everybody about it.

DR. CRAWFORD: There was a lot more of that than I realized, Mrs. Fort.

MRS. FORT: Oh, there was so much of it that it was terrible.

DR. CRAWFORD: It is hard for us who are younger to know how times have changed.

MRS. FORT: We would come from church. You know, I've always been in church. And we would come up from St. Anthony's. We would be coming down Jackson Avenue. Grown men would throw rocks at us as we were coming down Jackson Avenue. Some of the kids had a way of running. I would throw rocks back as fast as I could. If they didn't care if they hit me, I didn't care who I hit. They were together. I heard one say, "Aw, they

are throwing back."

I said to a girl, "Give me that pistol." I didn't have anything but a rock. They ran. I had no pistol.

DR. CRAWFORD: I don't believe you have ever been intimidated, have you, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: Never yet. The time might come.

DR. CRAWFORD: I doubt it.

MRS. FORT: You know we went to the auditorium when our church had the children singing. They put all the children from St. Ann's in front and our children were in the back. You couldn't even see them. They told us we could not sit downstairs in the auditorium. We had to go up in, what do you call it, the pigeon roost. Since my kids were on the stage, I went up there. This old man came and said, "Get up those steps." I said, "Get back down there!" I stood and stared at him. He was there already, but when I stopped and stared at him he turned and went back.

The next day I wrote the Bishop a letter. I told him I thought my children were in the Catholic Church--the church for all. I said, "but you were there and you saw my kids in the back of the stage. I wasn't just talking about my own children; I was talking about all the black kids from the black schools and they were on the back of the stage. You might have heard them, but you didn't know who it was singing. But if you heard a good voice it was the black kids. Since you put them on the back, I am going to have to take my children out of the church because I don't want my children ostracized by anybody."

When he came to church that Sunday, Father called me over to his house. He said, "The Bishop wants to speak to you." When he was in church he wanted us to kiss his ring. I didn't. His ring didn't taste all that good to me.

I went over there and he said, "You have a grievance."

I said, "No, I had a complaint--just plain out complaint." I said, "You call yourself Catholic and you call yourself Christian, but when you get to heaven I want to stand up there and look you in the face and ask you if you consider yourself God's child." I said, "I don't think you are going!" (Laughter)

After it was over Father said, "That was the Bishop!"

I said, "Look, I don't care. He was born just like I was, and just like my kids were born. He is supposed to be human and he is inhuman." And then Father and I had a little argument.

And he says to me, "You know, that is a little sassy to me."

I said, "Look man, two grown people can't sass each other, you'd better get this in your head."

He said, "I beg your pardon."

But I just never did think that anybody had a right to hurt me. And if they did, they got hurt right back, you know.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did they make a change about the way they treated black children in the church?

MRS. FORT: Long after that. Because I said that our children were not going and then they changed bishops which made it a lot better. Even some of the teachers were cruel and I had a run-in with one of them. She would push the children's heads up against the wall. I was teaching in another room, but

this little girl came in there crying and said, "Sister pushed that little girl's head against the wall."

I went over there and opened the door and stood and looked at her and she had these students lined up and every time she would say something she would shove them and shake them like that.

I said, "Look, those are children. Maybe you have never been a mother, but I am. Don't do that to the children. You're supposed to be teaching the children. But if you want to fight, see a grown person." She got angry. The next morning she had done something to another kid and they took her hat off on the yard.

I was in Father's house using the telephone when the children took her hat off. One of the other sisters came in and when I came out there said, "You did this, you did this."

I said, "Don't you ever put your finger in my face." I said, "Look, I am a teacher here just like you are and you've got to respect that." I said, "I didn't know that child was going to do that, but I'm glad she did." I went in my room and I was so angry that I didn't teach my class. I just sat there all the rest of the evening. When school was out and we were marching out, the principal came to me. She knew I didn't do it. She came to me and was asking me about something else. And she said, "Sister, this is the way it was."

Sister says, "What" and she turns around because she thought I was telling her. I wasn't telling anybody. I was angry.

The next day when I went to school I was so sorry for her. She came in the room to me and hugged me and she said, "I didn't

know how bad I was."

I said, "I can tell you a lot about yourself that you didn't know."

She said, "No." But we were friends after that. She was here two years ago--here at our church--and we were glad to see each other. People had to learn not to do things that they had done all their lives. You know, all my life, my people were brought here as slaves. I have every book that you can read about it. I read those books. And I say I am not a slave. Abraham Lincoln did not free anybody but himself. Because in the hearts of people you are still not free. You have to free yourself. I have always freed myself.

DR. CRAWFORD: I believe you are one of the most free people I have ever met. I don't think you have ever been anything but free since you were a child.

MRS. FORT: I haven't. I've always been free.

DR. CRAWFORD: It is in your heart and in your mind.

MRS. FORT: In my heart, mind and body I'm free! I've always been.

DR. CRAWFORD: What church were you going to then and what school did you teach?

MRS. FORT: Not Little Flower but St Anthony's Catholic Church.And I taught at that school at that time. When I left there, I went to the Baptist Industrial College. They needed a teacher there in science and music, and I went there for one term.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where was Baptist Industrial College.

MRS. FORT: In Mississippi--Hernando, Mississippi.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you do that long?

MRS. FORT: Just one year. That was a plenty. Because the injustice there was terrible. If I got on a bus here on a Monday morning to go down there to school, they would put a piece of paper between the black passengers and the white. They would hang this newspaper from the top down. If I was coming home on a Friday evening, they would say to me, "We don't have any nigger seats." When you bought your ticket, they would say, "We don't have any nigger seats."

And I would say, "What are you doing on there?"

They would drive off and leave me. Well, a man driving one of these old big trucks told me to get on the truck and I was afraid because I didn't know who he was or what he was, but he brought me here. I got on that truck in order to get home because my husband and children were here. I just taught that term and stopped because I didn't like that. After that, they would have to come get me and bring me home. Then I started teaching at Burdett Junior High School. People would come and get me and say, "We need you." And I would go.

When I started teaching there, I saw the same newspapers on the train. If the white section was too full and they had to over flow, they would put newspaper between the black passengers and the white.

DR. CRAWFORD: I had never heard of that. That's news to me.

MRS. FORT: You should have been on there. I'll tell you an incident that was very funny. There were two men

on that train one evening. As we were coming in one of them said, "I'm scared to death." A lady had a little baby across the aisle. he said, "Lady, hide that baby."

And she said, "What do you mean?"

"Lady, they'll lynch an angel down here! Hide that baby!"

I laughed out loud. A man got up and asked me, "What are you laughing about?"

I said, "I'm laughing at everybody that favors you. I'm the angel."(Laughter) He sat down. It was just funny.

Another time I rode the bus home. And you know, they would count the passengers--the white passengers and then the black passengers. Well, a white man got on there and sat with me because there just wasn't another seat. So when they got to the next stop, they got off and they counted and counted and couldn't find where this odd passenger was. They just kept doing it. And another man got on. They counted all up and down and he said, "No, I am missing one white passenger." Finally, this man got up and said, "Are you looking for me?"

And he said, "Yes."

He said, "Well, here I am." And there was a lady on there from St. Louis and she had on a lot of rings. They told her that she was going to have to get up and move back. She was laying on a pillow.

I said, "Don't move honey. Didn't you pay your fare?"

She said, "Yes."

I said, "Sit there in your seat."

He said, "What do you have to do with it?"

You see, I am right. That is a passenger. Just then some soldiers who were on the bus got up and said, "Look here, we are riding too. And we are just back from Korea. You see this man sitting here with me picked me up one day. I was laying out--I had been shot and he picked me up and carried me to safety. And I am taking him to Alabama, of all places, to meet my family." And those soldiers started singing "Glory Glory Alleluia." It set that bus. Everybody started singing on there. They were quiet up to Memphis. Nobody said another word on there--on the bus, I am trying to say when those soldiers started singing. They were white soldiers and three blacks. They were all singing and rejoicing and they would hug and say, "Didn't we come through that thing together?" It just made them feel so bad that they had been so foolish.

Then I started teaching black history. I would teach it to white people and to black people. I would teach it in white Catholic schools. I was going around teaching black history. One school I went in and this priest came and stood and stared at me like this. He was just staring and looking at me. So I talked directly to him. I said, "Don't think that you were born, but had you been, I think, you would have been just as desperate as the rest. Because I see now, [it was] because you didn't know any better. But from now on when you read your Bible and go back and think when God made that one garden he made man in His own image and likeness. I stayed and you left. I was in God's image and His likeness and if you left that is your business." I said, "Maybe you had leprosy."

He didn't say anything more. He just stood there awhile and he turned and walked away. He was angry. And then one Sunday at my church he was there and he saw me there. We were standing out and getting ready for a picnic up here at Little Flower. This priest we had could not preach. He would get up and say a little something and then church was out.

I walked over to him and I told our preacher, "Are you teaching this man how to be a Christian?"

He said, "Teaching me how?"

I said, "You don't know how. I thought of my little priest that I am teaching him to be a Christian. Maybe he was teaching you."

They got a good laugh. And I said, "For instance, you, when you get up there next Sunday preach a little, and tell the people something. Somebody's mad because their daughter ran off with the garbage man, somebody's mad because they haven't any money, somebody is half sick and they go to church. And you say, 'Get up, sit down, stand up again, sit down, God bless you, go.' The mass is ended and I don't get anything out of it. I want to hear you preach a sermon."

He got up [the next Sunday]. He came back and said, "Mama Fort, how did that sound today?"

I said, "It did pretty good." He was nice. And you know the little priest got killed in Jackson, Tennessee. Father Jackson. You might have known about it--a man killed him.

DR. CRAWFORD: I remember when it happened, Mrs. Fort.

MRS. FORT: His mother only had that one child. It was pitiful.

He had a very pretty mother. He was a cute little priest. This man from here in Memphis killed him.

DR. CRAWFORD: Why did you become Catholic?

MRS. FORT: My brother was working at Christian Brothers College when I was about five or six. It was on Washington Street at the time. I heard them say; I didn't see it. He was working there and he would take me to St. Anthony's Church. Then he was baptized there and that was it and I was there.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were black people accepted better in the Catholic church than most others then?

MRS. FORT: Well, that was a black Catholic church--St.Anthony. Naturally, we were accepted there. That's where we got the slack from the priest and the nuns that I didn't take. We had a mass about three months ago honoring St. Anthony's Church and the members and all. It was beautiful having it up here at Little Flower. It was very beautiful most of all because most of the people are dead now, but we had quite a few still living. Some were sick worse than I am. Professor Hobson was one. Everybody was glad to see the old members because we gave fish fries and built our church up here on Vollintine. The Bishop came and said he didn't want any black churches. He wanted Catholic Churches. He dispersed it and we had to go wherever he sent us. I was in this diocese and I had to go up here. I could have gone some place else, but this was all right.

When we first got in there, some people left the church because we came in.

DR. CRAWFORD: Some white people left?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, they left the church. We had a priest. I just don't want to call names. He was the sweetest priest in the world. We were going to a meeting one night at Christian Brothers College--an agape meeting. And a person had opened a filling station down here on the corner of Watkins and Jackson. Father drove in his station and I was sitting there in the car with him. "Hey, I started to get some gas, but I forgot you are not with us anymore." And he drove on off. But he used to do little things like that.

Monsignor Leppert would take me places where I was going to speak. Monsignor Leppert would say, "Get on up and tell them about it." And I would get up and say what I had to say. If he didn't think I had said enough he'd say, "Tell them some more."

Monsignor Leppert was a saint, really. That man was wonderful. When he died, I think the city turned out because he was such a kindly man. He didn't even seem like just an ordinary man. There was just something so different in his countenance and his heart. This priest that I was talking about he was my priest at the time. He is still a very nice person. He has helped people so much. I just call him Father Guthrie. He is one of the swellest priests in the city of Memphis.

Once down at the auditorium when we had this organization that the people didn't like--the War on Poverty--I was one of the chairmen of that. Because people started making dashikis the mayor got mad. And he would send Dick Hackett up there to tell us what we could do and what we couldn't do. If Dick Hackett had a resolution it would be ever so good. He would vote against

whatever we said. And I said, "That's a good resolution that he has, but I have to vote against it on account of you and your mayor." I would vote against it. Dick Hackett brought the issue about the Boys' Club and that is how it got started. Dick brought that up there. I voted against it. We had to wait a while because I wouldn't let him come up and say, "I'm going to do this, but you can't do that."

The Boys Club was good. We needed it, but don't say I am going to do this, but you can't do that. It was just wrong. So later, he did get the Boys Club started. That was when we had War on Poverty.

One night we were speaking about the wrong that they were trying to do, but we couldn't have things that we needed. I carried a bus load of people to Atlanta, Georgia, to tell those people what we were going to have and what we weren't going to have. This man said, "You know, you've got me told in Memphis."

I said, "I'm in your territory now. You came to Memphis to say I couldn't. I came here to tell you I can and we are going to." I said, "I just passed down there on the street and I saw these people, some leaning against the wall, some lying on the walk their heads in the street and they are not black people. Why don't you go down there and clean that up instead of telling me I can't wear a dashiki?" I said, "You are practical down there." I had this bus load of people--kids and all.

I said, "We are trying to do something for ourselves. We are trying to make life right, because if we don't, this is going to be a terrible world. There is going to be chaos here. And we

can't have that. Now, I am talking about the United States. I want to see how you live and I want you to see how I live. And I want you to give us money so we can go down into the dining room and eat with you people because we don't even know what you eat."

He gave everybody $2.00 and we all marched down in the dining room and ate there. Now we had food, but I just did that. Then, I wanted the children to see how they ate down there and we couldn't. But we ate down there that day.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have always been especially concerned about the children, haven't you?

MRS. FORT: Yes, that is my specialty. I love children. Jesus was a little baby when he came. In order to get up there, you have to go as a little child. Children are innocent. Children can't be bad until we make them bad. They don't know to be bad.

DR. CRAWFORD: What did you try to accomplish in your teaching, Mrs. Fort? What did you try to teach the children about attitudes and feelings toward other people?

MRS. FORT: I told my kids--all of them--go and find out where you came from, where you have been. If you don't, you don't know where you are going. When you go, be ready. I said, "If you go to the army and you go there without a gun or if you've got a gun without any bullets, you can't fight. So when you go, be well fixed for it and have an education, be clean, be nice and you can find your way anywhere in the world. When you find it, come back and tell me what you find and where you found it. And they do.

DR. CRAWFORD: At first, black people could not go to the parks. Then, you got Thursday day at the Zoo. The only place black people could go was Church Park, wasn't it at first?

MRS. FORT: Well, that was a black park instituted by Bob Church.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you know Bob Church?

MRS. FORT: No, I never met him. My people knew him, but I met his wife one time after they moved to Africa and came back. I was a member of the Women's Federation. His wife and some of the other members of his family came to one of the meetings. But I had never met them.

DR. CRAWFORD: When did you first learn about the NAACP?

MRS. FORT: I was at a meeting over Hays Funeral Home. Hays' little daughter was born and Mrs. Hays wanted the meetings up there in honor of her granddaughter. This lady came up there and asked us to join the NAACP and to take the Crisis Magazine. And I was willing to join. I would say it was like working a new puzzle. I don't know what it is, but I will join. You see it was made up of presidents of organizations. I was president of the Mother's Debonair Guild. I joined for my organization--my vice president and I. Then we came out and signed up all the members in the Mother's Debonair Guild. We all became members.

At that time you were not supposed to say you were a member of the NAACP. You would likely be arrested. I would tell people. I would say to somebody, "Are you a member of the NAACP? " and they would say, "No." I would say, "Why not?" They might say,

"You know we are not supposed to belong to that." I would say, "That is a national organization." And they would say, "For what?" And I'd say, "The advancement of black people." And she might say, "What is the "C" for?" And I would say, "Any color can join." That "C" is colored and everybody can join. Then I would ask white people to join.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you get any white people to join?

MRS. FORT: Just one or two. Not too many, but some did. I thought it was nice. Because unless we start joining together it's going to be, I am saying this is coming on like the long ago. This is the fourth time span. Your first time span was when God created man and the garden. Then he had to put man out for sin. Man began to sin in there. Your second time span was when the Nephalin came and we had great potentates and man had every sin under the sun. God sent the flood. He raised up Noah to build that boat. And then we came out of that boat from Noah and his sons. The third time span was when Jesus came. When he came, he still couldn't handle the people that killed him. So I knew what they would do for me. They killed Jesus. Right now, things of all this dope and sin are coming back to the same sinful world. He said next time by fire. Man is going to kill himself. You see how they are killing each other--shooting each other. It is terrible. I think this is the beginning of the last days. You know he said 'in those days' and when he said 'He made the world in six days,' he was talking about years, but in that time. Because Adam was about 930 before he had his first child. So it had to be that God didn't just make the world in six days of

24 hours. Because he says, "A thousand years in your sight is but one day to God." So I am going to count days like he counted them--thousands of years. Actually, the world couldn't be thousands of years old now if it wasn't so. We have to love each other. People have to stop hating and start to loving. This is going to be a terrible war this time. And it is going to be a war of fire with hate in every heart. And hell is going to be full of so many people with hate in their hearts. You just can't live like that.

Now, I love everybody, but I'm going to say what I'm going to say. I never bridle my tongue. I say just what I am going to say because I have free speech. Only my mother slapped me in the mouth for talking too much. Nobody else did and they better not.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have always believed in free speech, haven't you?

MRS. FORT: Yes, and I teach my children that and my grandchildren to speak up. Don't mumble. Talk out loud and say what you are going to say. But read and learn so you can know what to say.

DR. CRAWFORD: Didn't you see a lot of people around you who were afraid to speak up and say what they thought?

MRS. FORT: I see them now. I was working at one of the bakeries. Some young ladies came by here one day giving away samples of bread from Wonder Bakery. I said, "I'd like to do that."

One of them said, "Well, you call down there and maybe they'll hire you."

So I called down there and a lady who said her name was Miss Pansy--she never did give me any other name but Miss Pansy--I told her I wanted to work there. I said, "I always did eat Tastee Bread."

And she said, "But this is Wonder Bread."

I said, "Just give me a chance to eat it."

She told me to come on down. I went down there with my daughter and my niece and she hired us all. And I wound up telling folks what to do down there. Mr. Sanders was the manager. He was real nice and, I gave two big dinners down there to advertise his bread.

One day when I went in his office, I told him we weren't getting enough money.

He said, "Did you tell the others to come up and say they weren't getting enough."

I said, "Yes, I told them."

He said, "Why didn't they come?"

I said, "They were afraid of getting fired."

He said, "Aren't you afraid?"

I said, "No, I'm not afraid of getting fired. If you want to fire me for telling you that I am doing good work, you do it."

He said, "How much more money do you think you ought to get?"

I said, "How much do you think I am worth?"

He said, "How can you sell my bread?"

I said, "If I can make your sales come up twenty times more than they are right now, would you give me a better salary?

He said, "Yes."

So I got one of the girls to take me over in Arkansas in her car and I went to different places and asked. I carried bread. I asked them if they would buy Wonder Bread. Would they give me an order for Wonder Bread? They would give orders for fifty loaves of bread and all like that. I went on. I didn't know the stores. I just would stop in any store. I would give them a loaf of bread and ask them if they would buy it. So they sent the orders in and I was selling bread. So he called me up there again and he said, "Could you get the girls to come up with you?"

I said, "They are afraid."

He said, "Well, you sure sold my bread and I heard something else you did. You sold a paper, didn't you?"

I said, "Yes, I sold a newspaper."

He said, "L. O. Swingler told me." L.O. Swingler was a man trying to make a paper called The Memphis World. He couldn't sell the paper. He came over here and said, "Mrs. Fort, they said you could help me sell this paper."

I said, "It's easy to do if you can do it if you just want to sell the paper." He said, "Well, what are you going to do?"

I said, "I'll write a column."

He said, "What is that column?"

I said, "That column I see a lot today. That column is "Thought for Today." I see it in other papers now, but that was my column, "A Thought for Today." Then I would write poetry and put in. Finally I would go around to somebody's house and get a picture. A lady on the next street had a son who was back from the army. I got his picture and put it in the paper and wrote a

story about him. I would write stories about different people. They didn't know it was going to be in there until they got the paper. I told them until you get the paper you don't know who is going to be in there next.

Then I had them put on a baby contest. They put these little certificates in the paper and you signed them and the baby who brought the most in would be the prize winner. I've forgotten how much money it was now. My god-son's grandchild won because I had more. I would go around and ask more people to give me the certificate from their papers and I presented them. This little girl's name was Olympia Ann Silvers. I had taught her father in school and in my dance school too. She won the contest.

Then Mr. Swingler's wife came in and we put on a show down at the skating rink on Beale. She made a Hawaiian salad. I had never heard of that before. You take a watermelon and you put all kinds of fruit in it and make it into a basket and that is a Hawaiian salad. I got on the stage and helped her make it.

Then he went around to businesses and they gave rugs and prizes. I had everybody coming down there to get a prize. Naturally, they would have to buy a paper.

DR. CRAWFORD: So you sold bread and then you sold papers--the Memphis World?

MRS. FORT: I had sold the Memphis World first, but Mr. Sanders who was president of Wonder Company. He told me Swingler had told him I had helped him sell the papers. I didn't take any money for it. I just sold the paper. It was fun for me to get the paper out. I am going to start taking money, from

anybody who wants to give me money.

You know I help people in elections and I don't take any money. When they used to pay you for working and you went down to sign up for working at the polls, they would send you a check about this long--about 8 inches long. It was a thing to laugh at, you would have to wait three or four months to get it. That would be six dollars and you would work all day long on the polls. In fact, I was the first black person to work inside. I hate to hear that thing--first black--but we had tried to get in and you couldn't. They would take people in cars and they would take you around to five or six different polls to vote. That's how they won the elections.

DR. CRAWFORD: Who did that, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: Your city people.

DR. CRAWFORD: The city machine?

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: And they would take people to vote at one place and then to another?

MRS. FORT: And another. Then they would come right back here in this yard back here and Mrs. Mary Montgomery would cook spaghetti in a tub. They would serve whisky and spaghetti. One morning people were dying. My nephew was back there. And my sister called down, and said that Thomas was as sick as he could be. We carried him to the hospital and they had to wash his stomach out. It poisoned people--that spaghetti in the tub. They were eating spaghetti in celebration for all this voting in all these places.

That's when I decided. You see, you couldn't go in there. You didn't have any business in there to work or anything like that. So I started handing out literature for Governor Clement or somebody. I asked him for his literature and he gave it to me.

They said, "You'll have to go way down there." You see they were down the street, I had to come back down here to hand it out. So I would walk across the street and come on down back by the place. I had to pass there to come back to home. And if anybody was on the street I would hand them some literature.

Mr. and Mrs. Gatlin, who live on Vollintine, they started doing it too. So we were the ones out doing it. Finally, my brother and Dr. Lyncher Johnson and a man with the insurance company, they had us meeting down there. They decided we should do this and so he asked me to get somebody to go with me. You know when the old Owen College was on Orleans. I got Katie Sexton and we went down there. Some policemen showed us how to use the booth and everything. We worked down there. That is when Kennedy came in.

Then they sent me out here at Klondike School to work. Before then they didn't let us work on the polls. The next year they had me and a lady named Milly Johnican to go to all of the polls. That's when Harold Ford was running against what's his name. They had us go to all the polls to see how the vote was going.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was 1974 if it was his first race.

MRS. FORT: It was. It was the first because I gave him his first dollar. Then I let him come in my house to

campaign. Milly Johnican and I had to ride around to the polls and see how the vote was going. We went in this church up here off of Vollintine and when I went in there to ask for the count, this man said, "You're getting no count out of here."

I said, "Could I use the telephone?" Well, I had this phone line to Washington. In a little while some officers came in and asked him why I couldn't get the count?

He said, "I give up the job." But I got the count and I had to do that all during the day. I had to get the count from each poll to see how he was faring in Memphis.

DR. CRAWFORD: But they didn't want to give it to you, did they?

MRS. FORT: No, he didn't want to. He was ugly about it.

DR. CRAWFORD: How have you seen things change in the last twenty years or so, Mrs. Fort, since Harold Ford was elected and Memphis has grown up bigger? Have you seen it change much in the way people are treated?

MRS. FORT: Yes. Since black people started fighting back, people are getting kinder now. It used to be that you didn't fight back and didn't say anything back--that is, most of them didn't. People just thought you had to take stuff. I have always found my way with people because out here you have white and black people--white and black children--and all of us played. There were three sets of Jewish children out here--the Wolfs, Goldclangs and the Engelbergs. The way they fought; they all had stores. The Engelbergs would call the Goldclangs that they ought to give a big order of dress material and everything and would give the address as a vacant field. Then they would call

and try to do them the same way. They would call the Wolfs and they would do them the same. I was with them once on the winning side every time. They'd say, "Come on,let's fix them." And we would fix them. (Laughter) I am sure my mother found it out.

DR. CRAWFORD: And your mother put a stop to it?

MRS. FORT: Oh,yes. She really did. All the kids played together. We really had a good time playing together. They would all come here to play. A lot of times I would go down to the Goldclangs. Mrs. Goldclang used to before all my hair came off, I used to wear three little curls in the back. Fannie would wear the same thing. Mrs. Goldclang had a beautiful daughter named Fannie. She had a lot of kids, but Fannie was the oldest. She and I would work in the store and Mrs. Goldclang would tell them that I was her daughter from Egypt. (Laughter) People were just as nice when they would come in and I would help her sell things. You know how you wouldn't sell things until you had packed it back. I'd bring it out and put it on sale for more than it was at first. People would just buy that stuff.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was a sale.

MRS. FORT: Yes, that was a sale. Well, that is the way all stores do. Didn't you know that?

DR. CRAWFORD: I've seen it sometimes.

MRS. FORT: That's the way they do. What they have on sale, is that they are selling it more than it was at first. But it is on sale now.

MS. ANN KNOX: I just marvel that you didn't become a business woman because you seem to have an instinct.

THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS "MEMPHIS BLACK HISTORY." THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MRS. MARIE FORT. THE DATE IS SEPTEMBER 6, 1989. THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS BY DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE, AND ANN KNOX. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW III.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mrs. Fort, I would like to ask you today about some of the groups you worked with. You have been active in so many things in addition to all the things you do--adopting the children and helping people. You have worked with others in cooperation. Can you tell us about the Kennedy Democratic Club?

MRS. FORT: We were with the club downtown and they didn't think anybody in north Memphis should be elected to office or should run for office. If you lived this side of Madison you were just out of the running. I kept saying, "let's get our own organization." They didn't want to do it because all these people, you know, from south Memphis, they were people I had used in my group when I was Chairman of March of Dimes. After they got into this group they didn't want to work with us. I didn't want an office; however, I won one. I didn't even go because I didn't like being in office.

One morning I was on my way to New York for WOPC. Katie was taking me to the airport--Katie Sexton. I said to her, "You know, when I come back, I want an organization over on this side of

Memphis."

She said, "I'll see about it."

We were just elated over President Kennedy and what he had done. I said when we come back we are going to think of a name. I didn't think of it right then, but we are going to think of a name. I had to stay a week, you know. We were having a seminar there. And when we got back and got home, Katie had already organized it. We met and named it the Kennedy Democratic Club.

DR. CRAWFORD: What a good name!

MRS. FORT: We wrote to his brother and asked him if it was all right to use Kennedy's name. His brother said, "Yes." His brother said he'd like to be with us when we opened, but he couldn't, but he thought it was great. The club is still functioning. It's a wonderful group. It is under Charlie Morris who is the president. He's been the president for quite some time. Why we keep him president is because we don't have the bickering and the arguing--I want to do this and he won't let me be this. We think if this man just keeps on going the way he is, the club will keep functioning. They help people get jobs. If you are sick they give you a donation. People in trouble get a donation. It couldn't be any better. That is Charlie and Alma Morris.

DR. CRAWFORD: Was that organized in the 1960s, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: No, let's see, it was during the time of WOPC (War on Poverty Corps) You know, I don't like dates, I don't eat dates and I can't remember dates. (laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, it was when or after President Kennedy was

in, wasn't it?

MRS. FORT: Yes, after he was killed.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was a good memorial to him.

MRS. FORT: Yes, we thought it was because we thought he was just our savior. He said, "That all the big boats and the little boats were together. We were going to help him rock the little boats," we thought.

DR. CRAWFORD: He wanted to help everyone. I think he said also, "The rising tide raises all the boats."

MRS. FORT: That's what I am trying to say, but I don't remember it as he said it.

DR. CRAWFORD: He wanted everyone to be helped.

MRS. FORT: Yes, he did. He and Martin Luther King were just for people, period. Obviously, he and Martin Luther King and the Savior were all people.

DR. CRAWFORD: Who organized the Kennedy Democratic Club while you were in Washington?

MRS. FORT: Alma Morris and Katie Sexton. Katie got Alma and all the people who had belonged to the club in South Memphis. She got them together--those who lived on this side--she got them together and got it going.

DR. CRAWFORD: Why did it take longer to get a club in North Memphis? Why was it slow getting started here?

MRS. FORT: Because this person would say," You know, I'm on the board in this other club." And they didn't want to get off of that board when you could have your own board if you come this side. They were asking us to help buy a building. I said, "We could get our own building." They thought

that was ridiculous! How were we going to get a building.

I say, "You got a home to live in." Why can't you get a building for our club?" And we did get a building. However, we have released it now for something else, but we did get a building. Our club just went along fine, and it is still going along.

DR. CRAWFORD: It is still active for neighborhood needs.

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: And it still takes part in elections?

MRS. FORT: It does. It really does.

DR. CRAWFORD: It has been active for a long time. I believe over 20 years now.

MRS. FORT: Yes, it has. These people who are running the club now, because we all listen to them. They ask you to do things to help people. They motivate you. Most clubs you sit down and meet, and take up a collection, and go home. We discuss politics and things and ways to live. If a person is in trouble, they are right there to help. So I think it is the most wonderful club in the city of Memphis.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you have regular meetings?

MRS. FORT: The third Monday in each month.

MS. KNOX: How many people are in the club now, would you guess?

MRS. FORT: The Kennedy Democratic Club?

MS. KNOX: Yes.

MRS. FORT: I couldn't tell you, because they are on and off.

One day we might had 30, and the next time we might have 15. You know how people come to meetings. I forgot this was the meeting day; however, Alma, Charlie's wife, calls everybody. They don't want to come, they want to do something else so they make an excuse. Then, when you tell them what happened at the meeting they'll say, "Oh, I wish I had been there." (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: People are like that.

MS. KNOX Is there an affiliation with the Democratic Party or is this something entirely separate?

MRS. FORT: Yes, there is an affiliation not that we pay into it, but we work with the Democratic Party. When people start running for elections they make it to our club.

MS. KNOX I bet!

DR. CRAWFORD: They have to get around and speak, don't they?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. Whenever they are wrong, I put in my two bits. "Why weren't you here when such and such a thing happened? Why do you need us now? You didn't need us before now." I will put in my two bits.

We had one man to come in who wanted to be sheriff. He didn't know if he could hire any black people there. He didn't know if he could hire any poor people. He'd say, "I don't run that."

I said, "Then, you can't be sheriff if you don't know how to be." Because the sheriff is over all of Memphis and Shelby County.

DR. CRAWFORD: He has a very large payroll.

MRS. FORT: But he has that payroll if he wants it. If he gets his own payroll according to what he wants and

the way he wants it. So I put in my two bits that why can't you do this. If you aren't able to do this, then you aren't able to be sheriff.

DR. CRAWFORD: They better not come to the club unless they know the facts and are prepared to answer your questions.

MRS. FORT: Right.

DR. CRAWFORD: What about the War on Poverty? How did you get in that?

MRS. FORT: When the War on Poverty started, we would see on television that the Mayor was running it. He had two people whom he felt could do it all. He said his secretary could take over something and [we felt] people were not getting any results. People didn't know what it was about. One night we met at the library on Front Street. That was when I was not supposed to go in the library. But we had a meeting there and he came. This is actual. This man came in and straddled the chair backwards. The mayor came and sat in the chair backwards and looked back at us. [He thought] you know I am going to ignore you. There were people--both black and white people there--but he was sitting as though we were nobody. He had his staff and they were going to run it the way he wanted it run. He was just talking, "This is just my first visit."

A lady by the name of Frances Coe carried me in. She was on the school board. We were good friends and when this man turned his back to do all this talking to us, I said, "You know what, I have some friends that say you don't want this to go along right.

Do you?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Then why don't you get out of the way and let the people run it?"

He said, "All right." He got up and walked out.

DR. CRAWFORD: May I ask who was the mayor?

MRS. FORT: I hate to tell you, but you know whko was mayor at that time. I won't call his name. I've called it so much and been so mad about it. I want to forgive him. I told his son one night that he wasn't such a bad man; he just didn't know any better. Everybody will know who was mayor when War on Poverty was going on.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had a committee or a people's group to work with it then, didn't you?

MRS. FORT: Yes, it was a big group. They had a whole big staff really in a building. We were running things quite well--getting food to people. We had one group out in South Memphis, and I have forgotten what they called it now, and an office out there where people could come in and get help. I was demanding from them that they put an office out here. After a bit they did. They put one up here where my church, St Anthony's Church, had been. St Anthony's Church had been on Vollintine. We built that church and after the Bishop had us move, why we met in that building. We did pretty well. People could come there and see about getting food stamps and other things that were necessary.

The Kennedy Club had put a home for people on Vollintine. If

you were put out of your home you could go there and stay until you could find a place to stay or until we could find a place for you. We had a group that would get up clothing and we still have a group that would get up clothing, food and everything.

DR. CRAWFORD: And that was the federal government that was working through that?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. Could I say, I don't know. They were supposed to. Let's say they supposed to, but they [city officials] were opposed to what we needed.

DR. CRAWFORD: They sent money but they didn't supervise it then, did they?

MRS. FORT: In a way or in a sense they said they were supervising. But I couldn't see what they were doing for the people. It was during that time that I spoke up for legal services. We did not have legal services. This lady came to me and said, "We need this organization. Three lawyers came to see me." I think they were Johnson, Coon and I can't think of his [the other] name. They wanted to start legal services.

I took it before the board because I was vice chairman. I took that before the board and it was granted. And that is how we got legal services started here.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you were board member on that, weren't you?

MRS. FORT: Not at the time, but I've been a board member now since '82.

DR. CRAWFORD: And they have had legal aid services ever since that time?

MRS. FORT: Yes, they have. Thank God they have. At least

they have promised it whether they give it or not. I argue a lot in the meetings. What are we using our lawyers for if they are not going to help the people? Because the government allows them to take so many cases a year? You cannot help everybody because you are limited to how many people you can help a year. I got sick and I can't argue any more, but I'm really saying this should be changed.

DR. CRAWFORD: The rich people can always get legal help, but it was the poor people who didn't have it before then.

MRS. FORT: I know that. I was in an office one day and a lady whose father was rich wanted to study to be a doctor. This man said to her, "You don't have to worry about your father because the government will give you this." Then, I wondered why some other people couldn't get this same thing. You know, if this rich lady could get it then why couldn't anybody else? Why couldn't anybody else? I didn't specify, but why couldn't anybody else get it, especially those who were too poor to pay for it? I don't think too much came of that. But I had voiced my sentiments and I was glad.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you felt that way about legal aid services too?

MRS. FORT: Sure I did.

DR. CRAWFORD: And that is still going on and I think I read in the paper this week that the state is going to extend legal aid services into smaller towns too.

MRS. FORT: I hope so. You know who the government is?

DR. CRAWFORD: It's supposed to be the people.

MRS. FORT: Now, you are. If you are paying the salaries of

everybody else they are working for you. I told them that in an interview we had with Harold Ford. I said, "You are working for me; I am not working for you." Because this man said the senior citizens should be cared for by their children. In China the children take care of the old people. I said to him, "You took my boys to Vietnam and everywhere else and filled them up with bullets and dope and then you think he is able to come back here and work. He can't even help himself." I said, "I don't live in China. When have you been there?"

He said, "I haven't been."

I said, "Well, I'm not going. I'm going to stay here and since I am the government." I stood up and told the people--the senior citizens--I say, "If you are a taxpayer, stand up because you are the government and these people are hired by you and they had better listen." And I don't care anything about Reagan's people, because they can't tell me how to spend my money. I am paying them to work. And he is going to tell me what I can have and what I can't have. This is unfair and I am not going to listen." At the time that they were trying to close nursing homes and this kind of service here, they were trying to stop that. Harold Ford called me from Washington and asked me if I would speak, and I told him I would. I did.

DR. CRAWFORD: You went to Washington?

MRS. FORT: No, here. We spoke here. I told them since this is my money, you do what I say and I am not going to China. That ended it. We still have the nursing services.

MS. KNOX: They are very important services.

MRS. FORT: They are. What would I do without her. One morning two years ago when I had a massive heart attack, the lady came in and the doctor had given me the wrong medicine. If she hadn't come in, I would have died. I told them that. If it hadn't been for this nursing service I wouldn't be here. Thank God I am here.

DR. CRAWFORD: It has helped so many people--older people and others too.

MRS. FORT: Well, it is a service that we need. We need this service. More need it than are getting it, but they just don't have the people to go around.

DR. CRAWFORD: Can I ask you about another one that you were active in, Mrs. Fort? That is the Porter-Leath Children's Home. You are on the board, aren't you?

MRS. FORT: I think so. I've been working with them, but I haven't been to a meeting this year. I haven't been able to go because I had my eyes operated on beginning in December and that ended in May, and I just wasn't able to get around. I went to one meeting of the Agriculture Department. You know we have a garden over there in that neighborhood, but I haven't been able to do anything about it since then.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, you sort of have your own children's center here at home.

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, my kids come quite often. They are here most every day. One little boy came the other day and said, "When are you going to quit being sick?"

I said, "If you tell God you don't want me to be sick, He'll stop me from being sick."

He said, "Well, I'll tell Him." He left to go and tell Him. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: That was a good answer. You have always been interested in young people and children, haven't you?

MRS. FORT: Yes, I used to be one. Yes, I used to be a kid. I used to visit older people. A lady named Mrs. Green used to live down the street. When I would get up in the morning and get my work done, I would say, "Mama, can I go and visit Mrs. Green? And she would say yes. I would go down there and Mrs. Green would show me how to make taffy and she would read the Bible and ask me what I knew about it. I knew a lot because I used to read all the time for my daddy. He would read at times and other times I had to read. I would even go to Sunday School with her to help her teach the classes. Another lady named Mrs. Green used to live over on Alma Street. She would call me although I was Catholic, she would call me on Monday evening to come to the Bible band so I could help her explain the Bible to the people.

Once after I was grown and married, I said I couldn't go because of the children or something. "Bring them along and come on." And I would go and I enjoyed it very much. Until she died I would keep going. Her daughter and I are real good friends even now. We were always because we grew up together. I am older than this daughter.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have worked with all kinds of people, helped

children, older people and people in between.

MRS. FORT: May I say that I was simply having a good time. Really, I wasn't just trying to help, I was trying to enjoy myself and I did.

DR. CRAWFORD: The things you have done have been good for you as well as others.

MRS. FORT: That's right. I was doing it for me too.

DR. CRAWFORD: What about Operation Push, Mrs. Fort? How did you get started in that?

MRS. FORT: Well, this Reverend Bell, I think it was, carried a group of us into it. I didn't work in it too long. I really didn't do too much in that. We met about six months and then I started doing something else and didn't have time to do too much in that.

DR. CRAWFORD: I don't see how you have done all the ones you did anyway.

MRS. FORT: I began to do something else and this began to take me away from that. You see my husband was sick,and he was an invalid. You had to lift him around and feed him and everything. So I couldn't do that and see after him too.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have had so much responsibility at home and outside too.

MRS. FORT: I don't just say it was a responsibility. It was doing what I wanted to do. At the same time my husband was sick, I had a brother who was blind and an invalid. I had two brothers who were invalids. I had all three of them in the house at one time.

This is funny. I was running a business. I had a massage salon and a beauty shop. I would get up and fix their breakfast and run down to the shop here on Jackson and Alma and get it ready for business. The people who were working there--I had three beauticians who would come in and some girls who would help me with the massage business. After I would get them stationed, I would come back and fix their dinner and run back down there and work. I was just back and forth. It seemed like a natural thing --nothing hard about it.

After they got so sick, and one of my brothers died. He got real sick on Thursday night. On Friday morning I took him to the hospital,and I never saw him alive again. I stayed there until 12 o'clock, and they said I should go home,because they are not going to bring him down right away. But I do think he was dead then. Then they called me the next day to tell me. I went out there two or three times, but I couldn't see him. And the next day they told me he was dead. That was one of my favorite brothers. You know they were all favorites, but that is the one that I say reared me. Because he told all about life, what to do, what not to do. I grew up with him explaining life to me.

He would say, "You don't have anything to sell, nothing to give away. Nobody buys a cow to get free milk." He would tell me this explicitly. I didn't feel bad over his good blessing for anybody.

The first young man who came to see me, my brother brought him. I was very bashful. I would sit and grin. I would put my hand up to my mouth and grin. He would say, "Get your hand down

from there and talk." He was just that way. He would watch everything you did and tell you what to do about it. I was just crazy about him.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had an education from a lot of people, didn't you?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. Surely did. People on the street from everywhere, you are getting an education from the way they live. If you gain anything from it, that is an education. There were so many people whom I just dearly loved because I was doing what I saw them do.

There was a lady down the street named Bobby, who dressed beautifully. One day I had a Sears catalog. I was sitting on the steps, and this was before Sears came to Memphis. I was leafing through there and I said, "Mama, this is one dress I want." My niece and I grew up together. I am four years older than my niece, but we dressed alike. I was just pointing out to Mama what we wanted and Miss Bobby came by going to work.

That was the third morning that she had passed,and I had the book out because I was trying to get things that looked like what she had on. She realized that. Miss Bobby came over and she got the book. She said, "I want this and I want this and you stop trying to dress like Bobby because you don't know what Bobby is doing. And you stop trying." She shut the book up. Then her sister came down the street and got the book and said, "And you want what else and what else and you better want nothing else." I understood what they were saying to me. I wanted to look like her because she was dressed so fine, but sometimes you don't have

the money to buy it.

But my mother had a thing that I am going to get you what you want and when you can't get it, you will say, "I've had it." She would buy what you wanted. And she said, "When the day comes, and you can't buy it, just say,'Well, I've had it.'" Everybody is rearing you if you just pay attention to what is going on.

DR. CRAWFORD: You can learn a great deal from other people.

MRS. FORT: I did. I learned a lot from other people. One lady named, Ethel Thurman, a lady from my church would come by. She loved my kids. She would come by. She taught me to do some kind of work with an oil on their clothing. You put designs on with this oil. You can't even find that stuff now. I did that for years. I began to put it on tablecovers and sell them. I would get a lot of money and I could do this and sell it. I learned a lot from her.

I went by a hat shop one day--Mrs. Sutter's on Ayers and Jackson. She had a school where they were learning to make hats and flowers. I stood at her window one day for about an hour watching. I came home and I said, "Mama, I can make hats and flowers."

She said, "You can?"

I said, "Sure." I asked for the money and went to town and got some hat shapes and came back and made hats and sold them. And I made flowers and sold them. This I gained from watching other people. They were a great influence in my life with what they were doing. Even today if I see you make something, I can make it.

I used to go to Sears and copy their designs and come home and make those dresses. I sewed for a lot of people and you know made money.

DR. CRAWFORD: You started early. I believe Sears came here at the latter part of the 1920s. And you remember before they had their building.

MRS. FORT: Sears came in the '28 or '29, somewhere along in there,because I think I was married when they came. I married in 1926 because we were some of their first customers. I remember going over there and taking out an account at Sears. My first child was born in 1928 and it was after that that I went over there and got an account with them.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you did not have to use the mail order catalog anymore?

MRS. FORT: No, I could go over there and copy what they had and get the material and make it. Really, I didn't buy their designs too much. My husband died in later years. But I would take a tablet over there and copy what they had, and come back and make it.

DR. CRAWFORD: Have you always been able to do that? To see something and go and make it yourself?

MRS. FORT: Usually. I do that even now. I saw a lady make a crocheted bed spread. You saw it over here the other day--the one I had.

MS KNOX: The one you had over here. That is beautiful.

MRS. FORT: Yes, I went to a lady's house one day and she was making one. She had one on her bed. I said, "How

did you make this? I have longed to be able to make these roses."

She said, "It's easy." And she showed me how.

DR. CRAWFORD: Could I ask you a few other things, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: Yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: What do you remember about the garbage strike in 1968 and the demonstrations and the boycotts and Martin Luther King? I know you must have had a part in it.

MRS. FORT: You know I had the massage salon and beauty shop. They had the men from the workhouse going around on the trucks, you know, picking up garbage. My shop was right around here on Randall Street. I had made a lot of signs saying, "Don't Patronize the Mayor with His Garbage Strike." And I went out there and I said to this man on the truck, "Would you allow your men to give these out for me?"

He said, "Throw them up there."

I said, "No, I want these put out right." And I had a tape and I taped one on the truck. (Laughter) Then, I gave one to the men on the truck a handful. I said, "This is for you." One of the men who had been on strike. I said, "Follow this truck and everywhere it goes, you just hand out one of these." And he did.

Then, when Martin Luther King came, I carried my grandchildren and some more, and we went to this big thing at the church down on Hernando. They had signs that read: "Today I am a Man" and all that. We were marching along and I thought it was going to be a good thing, but I was right behind the sound truck with my children. There were a lot of us all across the street. When all the trouble started, I went back to my brother's

printing shop on Hernando. I just walked back to the shop with my children. We got inside. I saw the most heinous crimes committed by the police than anything I've ever seen in my life. There was an old man who had his little grandchild by the hand. They sprayed mace all over him and this child. The mace was so thick that it was coming in through that shop. They had on masks, you know. They were beating people with their clubs on the street and spraying mace all on them. Now, that is one time I became so angry. I wanted to open the door and go out there. My brother said, "You can't stand it."

I said, "If I can stand the mace in here, I can stand it out there." They went down to the church that was down on the corner where the people were. They went in that church spraying those people with that mace.

DR. CRAWFORD: In the church?

MRS. FORT: In the church. I didn't go down to the church. Some of my people were in there. They went in there and sprayed those people. This is the person who is supposed to protect you. I always told my children that the police won't hurt you. They are supposed to protect you because we are paying them to do that.

If things would happen around here, I wouldn't call a policeman. They just got that bad. I couldn't stand them. Then, I began to make speeches on the television, radio and every place about what was going on and what we wanted. I said there is a song about "Tomorrow." Don't give it to me tomorrow, I want it today. I'm not waiting until tomorrow.

One of the men on the panel said, "If you go down some place, you could be fed."

I said, "Look, if you feed me today, I'll need some more tomorrow. I want the money to get my own. I don't want you to feed me. I want people to have jobs so that they can feed themselves. That's what people need right now--jobs so that they can feed themselves. Anytime you have to depend on someone to hand you a slice of bread, they might not give you the kind of bread you want.

You see, I want brown bread or I might want French bread. You might give me some other kind. I don't want that. When you give a man a chance to earn his own living; he is not depending on you for anything. The stuff that is given is given by you--the government. It is money you put in for that. There is supposed to be a surplus of things that they are giving out where farmers gave too much. They say they can't give cheese now because the cows didn't have enough grass because of the weather last year. They didn't have enough milk to get the cheese. So they aren't giving cheese now. But how do they get the cheese in the stores if there is no cheese? You know you can tell a little lie and a little lie will grow. It's a big lie,but they tell it in a little way. They have cheese. They could give people cheese if they wanted to.

DR. CRAWFORD: It is in the stores.

MRS. FORT: If they can give you all this dried milk. I pass out dried milk and all of that stuff. If they can give the dried milk where do they get the milk if the cows don't

have any milk? (Laughter) They give out. So you can see through governmental lies. But what can one person do?

You get your club together and you tell them this and this. And they say, "Uh-huh."

DR. CRAWFORD: During that time, Mrs. Fort, did you meet or hear Martin Luther King?

MRS. FORT: I was with Martin Luther King the day of this big thing. I wasn't with him, but I was marching. He had to run to save his own life. I was in that march. I was at the church when he made that speech about going to the mountaintop

DR. CRAWFORD: What did you think of that? What kind of speaker was he?

MRS. FORT: Beautiful, wonderful!

DR. CRAWFORD: You have heard a lot of preachers.

MRS. FORT: I have his album. I have about six or seven. I've been giving them out to schools and places. I had fifteen. I think I have about five now. I want every kid to hear what he says. Every kid has been to the mountaintop if he was black enough. He went to the mountaintop. If he was poor enough he went to the mountaintop. If he came from another country and can't speak English, he's been to the mountaintop. Martin Luther King was just reminding us, we've all been there. None of us expect to survive because I think there is going to be a war fought in America this year.

That was given the first of this year by a seer. She said, "There will more planes falling than ever before, and there would be a war fought on this soil. I sit and wonder: What war are they

preparing for?

I think the police went over on Summer where they found all of those guns and that ammunition. People are getting ready for a war. That war is going to be until people start loving each other and loving God. We are all going to be destroyed. At least, you all will, but I'll be gone. You all will be destroyed. I don't want my children and my grandchildren destroyed.

DR. CRAWFORD: What do you think about the war in Vietnam, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: That was a foolish war. It was very foolish. What did they go over there for? They didn't need to go there. They didn't help anybody, but they lost a lot of American men. My grandson, the first one killed from Shelby County, Melvin Fort, Jr.,I didn't like that. That was what that speech I was making on the Mall that day was about. You go over and you are the captains, the majors and everything,and my child is cannon fodder. His name is first up there on that list on Main Street. Look at Melvin Fort. He was only eighteen. Didn't get a chance to be a man! Well, I didn't like that war. I don't like any wars, but when you go to the old country, they've always fought, they've always hated. America should be a more loving country. Yet people are coming over saying--you know those people who call themselves the "skin heads". I could skin their heads because they are bundles of hate and they are the ones bringing all this stuff over.

If they copied from another group of skin heads who were helping people who were being robbed. But what they are doing is

killing out races of people. I don't know what they are. I don't know what race they belong to. I don't know where they came from.

When you hate, sometimes you have a reason. Because, you know, we had a way of whitening the black race. We got lighter and lighter, lighter and lighter. We have to hate to make people think we belong there. When I see people who hate that bad I believe they are people who whitened up. I don't believe they were born--maybe three generations back. But there are people who have whitened up and then they spread the hate so people won't know who they are. I really feel that way because, you know, Andrew Jackson's brother was a slave. We have five president's who were black. But people began whitening up because if you were black you were treated so badly in America. And they began to try to change. I know a lot of people that put on this skin successors. I don't put anything on my face but water, because I like the way I am. Soap and water will do it.

Black won't crack like that other. You kind of hold your own. But they think you have to use all that stuff to make you beautiful. Beauty is supposed to come from in here. The beauty they show is skin deep, but that ugliness is all the way in to the bone. When they are talking about murdering and killing, that is deep in. I had to tell a lady one day. I was working for Wonder Bakery. I started in her gate. She said, "Don't come in here with that stuff. Don't come in here."

She didn't know what I had. I said, "Oh, I don't want to get my hands dirty either." I turned and started off. I went next door and was giving that lady some bread samples. She said, "What

is that you are giving away?"

I said, "Hate." And I started on. She asked this lady, "What did you get?"

The lady said, "Bread." Then she told one of the other girls to bring her some of that bread. I said, "Don't you touch her gate. Don't you go in there." I said, "Do you know who she is?"

They said, "No."

I said, "That's that woman that used all that skin success. She got white and she doesn't want her neighbors to know it." (Laughter) And we didn't give her any bread. We did not. I didn't care if she didn't buy any. Because I was giving these bread samples out for Wonder Bakery. If she ever wanted some she could go and buy it to see what it was like. She didn't have to have any.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mrs. Fort, after Martin Luther King was killed did you notice changes taking place in Memphis? Do you think it had any effect on people here?

MRS. FORT: It had a tremendous effect of hate for a long time. It didn't prove out good until years after because people hated Martin Luther King because he was doing a service. I don't think they have the killer in jail even yet. I have never thought it.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you think they put the wrong person in?

MRS. FORT: Oh sure. He knew about it, but he didn't do it. The person whom I said did it, I won't say it again today, but I still think he did it. But one of the young men who was on duty to watch Martin Luther King they gave him a big job in Nashville not to talk. It was a thing done for hate. We were

getting ready to go down to hear him that night. We went every time. They moved his protection so that they could kill him. And if you see the building that this man was supposed to be in who shot him, that man couldn't have gotten a direct target from there. It was done from down on the ground in that garage or whatever they said it was. It was done from there. And on the radio they were saying there was a car going 80 m.p.h. If you can broadcast for 20 minutes about a car that is driving 80 mph down a highway, somebody is lying.

You cannot drive a car 80 mph and be seen for 20 minutes by one person because you have got to be driving 80 mph behind this person to see him getting away driving that fast down a highway. Everybody knew it was a lie. I knew it was a lie. I told everybody I could get to that it was a lie. The person getting away is a decoy. The person who did it was still here.

MS. KNOX: Do you remember how you heard about it? What your reaction was?

MRS. FORT: Yes, I was in my shop working along here on Jackson. And this is mean. I was massaging a man. One of the beauticians said to me, "Mrs. Fort, they just killed Martin Luther King." And you know when you are doing the patting, [messaging] I hit that man so hard, and the man said, "I understand." It had to be a mighty good man to say, "I understand," you know. Right then, I looked at that man and I said, "I'm sorry." He kept coming to me for four years after, but I hit him so hard [as her reaction] for shooting Martin Luther King. The man is laying here. That's the way I heard it. They

said, "Everybody get off the street." I had five people in my shop and I kept working, but two police cars sat at the door while I was in there working. When I got out, they drove on around home and followed me as I came home.

Then, they said nobody could go outdoors. The lady right next door gave birth to a baby, and I don't know if it was her husband or who it was out there in the car to take her, but the police beat him unmercifully that night because he was trying to get his wife to the hospital. I think one of them carried her or called an ambulance or something.

But you know, hate was going around. When I hit that man, I had an instinct that I am black and somebody white killed a black man and I hit him. That taught me a whole lot. I learned a lot that day. That man came to me till I closed my shop. You have to learn love.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, what changes do you think for the good were made later?

MRS. FORT: I really didn't see the changes. There might have been a lot of changes in the hearts of some people. But when it comes to physical changes: black people still don't have jobs, poor people don't have jobs. Regardless, you had a president to come in here and that was Reagan who said,"Give the jobs and everything to the rich man and that it would dwindle down to the poor." I saw a young white girl in one of his meetings on TV say to him that she had three children and she didn't have anything. He said, "Tighten your belt." It should have been put up around here and tightened on him. He told that girl to tighten her belt. Your presidents came in and they were still angry about

the Martin Luther King episode. You'd be surprised to know the anger that exists from that even today. And if those people don't get that out of their hearts and learn who God is, we are going to have a terrible time trying to live anyway. I really don't see a great advantage. People knew him and when I am lecturing to children and I tell them all about him and I play the record, I let them listen.

I say to them, "Here was a man who was unafraid to help the world." And I'll tell some kid, "I want you to be like this." Some of the kids will learn his speech. It is hard to remember all that, but some will learn it. I said, "Remember you have been to the mountaintop because you went to it with Martin Luther King." You know. They seem to understand. But there are grown-up people who were not born then. They can't understand why there is so much attached to Martin Luther King. I had a lady to say, "What did he do?" I said, "One day you asked me if I thought a man really went on the moon." I say, "He did just what that man did on the moon, King did right down here." Because she does not believe that anybody stood on the moon. "They couldn't have gotten up there. But I said, "Darling, they got up there." I said, "So did Martin Luther King. He got on the moon." In fact, I told her I wished she was up there. If I ever get you up there, I am going to leave you there.

But you know, people just don't understand. The moon is a long way off. They see it and don't know what it is. They'll say, "How on earth could man build a rocket to carry somebody way up

there." But they have to remember that Jesus said he healed the sick and raised the dead and he said, "Greater things than this, you will do if you believe on me." You can say to that mountain to move and it will move. But he didn't mean the physical mountain, but he meant that mountain of trouble, that mountain of unrest. You can say, "move" to that mountain and it will move, but they are saying, "Move, mountain", and it didn't move. Its still there.

MS. KNOX: You had said you married in your twenties? Right?

MRS. FORT: I married in 1926.

MS. KNOX: And you were how old?

MRS. FORT: I was going to be 22, I believe.

MS. KNOX: So that left you with a good many years as a teenager and young adult for a very active social life.

MRS. FORT. I wasn't so active. I had a band. (Laughter) There were seven of us. We were the Jazz Syncopaters.

DR. CRAWFORD: You were the Jazz Syncopaters.

MRS. FORT: We took jobs from two men down the street, Baker and Alex Hunt. Now, they were fine musicians. They had bands and everybody in their band wore uniforms. We took jobs from them. We did,honestly. We did more stuff. See, in that day you didn't sing with the band. We began to sing the songs because we liked them and we had three of us who could sing. We would sing and dance and we would change positions. Moses Beaseley could play the piano a little. I taught Otto Johnican how to play drums. We would put the instruments down,and we had a way of going from one instrument to the other and never let the

music stop. People would ask how we were doing that? We were faking, but we did it. The singing would still be going on. We just took jobs from people.

We had a park down here called Folk's Park. They gave big dances. He would call us for the matinee and we played for the matinee. People would want us to keep on playing for the night dance. Then a man named, Bud Dixon on a street--I don't know what street that was now--had a park. He would call us to come to him at 12 at night. At first mother wouldn't let me go. When I told her I was working, and the young men wanted to go and I was playing the piano, so we had to go. I began to go and play until five. The next morning mother would have to rub my arm it would be so sore--all that playing. I enjoyed it. We did that up until I had been married two years. My husband just became awfully mean about it.

He said, "I can't go and sleep in these folks' beds." But we played a long time. Then there was a man named Oscar Burt. If he found out I had a job someplace he would call the people and tell them I was sick and he would take my job. They would call me and say they were sorry I was sick, and I imagine he would tell them to call me.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did he have a band?

MRS. FORT: Yes, but we took his jobs. He would get one or two of my boys and go and take the job. I had a job in Chicago. I had never been to Chicago. I was going to play for a graduation there. My sister-in-law's daughter was going to graduate and she wanted us to play for their prom. I was getting ready to go and I was so glad because I had never been there. The

people sent me a telegram and said they had a band. Lo and behold, that was Oscar Burt! He had gotten the man who was working in my brother's print shop, Andrew Perry, and five more to go with him to do the job. They were in two cars--instruments and things. One of these trailer trucks fell on them, killed Oscar and another one, hurt Perry awfully bad and after that my husband said you are not going to play anymore. You'll get killed. I wouldn't have been killed. I wouldn't have been driving fast on the highway. I was going on the train and we were going to ship our instruments. He did that and he'll never do that again. He did me that way about five times.

MS. KNOX: On the nights that you were not playing in the band what did you have going on?

MRS. FORT: We'd have a party and a lot of kids would come over and we'd dance. My daddy got on his knees and prayed to God to stop his baby's dancing feet. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: You loved to dance?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. My mother was in Canada. I had all these kids over there, but my aunt was there from Chicago. She was like my daddy. You know, she was a genteel Christian woman. It was a sin to dance and it was a sin to play a song that wasn't a hymn or something like that. So I had these kids over and we were having a good time. We were playing and singing and dancing. She walked in the door and says, "I am telling James A.to stop this. I mean for it to stop." Well, Mama lets us have parties.

"Well, I just told James A."

So my daddy told the kids to go home. This made me so mad. I went in to tell him that I was mad and he was on his knees. "Oh God, please stop my baby's dancing feet." (Laughter) I caught a pain in my hip. Yes sir. That was before I was married. He was really praying that I would stop dancing, but I didn't stop.

R. CRAWFORD: You have always loved dancing.

MRS. FORT: Oh give me music and where a harp and I'll jump.

DR. CRAWFORD: And you did not go to school to study them?

MRS. FORT: No.

DR. CRAWFORD: You learned them yourself.

MRS. FORT: My grandmother was a dancer--my mother's mother. I guess it just hit on me, because the leaves out there in the yard use to wave and music would play. I don't know where it came from but music would play and I would dance all over the place. Then I would dance all the way down the street to the corner and cross over and dance all the way back. And I would come back to see if Mama was looking. You see, we weren't allowed out of the yard. If she wasn't listening I would dance back down again all the way. I didn't know till I was grown that she was looking.(Laughter)

I was talking about it one day and she said, "Yes, I saw you."

I said, "I went out of the yard."

She said, "I know. You were in one of your moods."(Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: You were in business for yourself a lot, weren't you? You organized a band early and then you started your massage business.

MRS. FORT: Then I sewed for people. I gave out of money. My husband was in the hospital then. I didn't have any money for those kids I had. You know, I would sew for everybody's kids especially for these across the street who needed things. I started taking in sewing. I would go to Sears and copy down their patterns and come home. I didn't know how to sew with a pattern. So I would just copy everything and come home and tell somebody I wanted to make them a dress. They'd say I'd make it for 75 cents. I would just sew. I had people over there on Faxon that I was sewing for.

Then there was this girl with the dance school. What was her name. Her father had an electric company. I believe it was Scott. She came over one day. I was making costumes for my kids. She came over with her father because my brother was having some electric work done. She saw these costumes and she asked me to make them for her kids. So I did. I sewed for her a long time. I can't think of her first name, but something Scott Dancing School. I made their costumes and then their pianist quit one night and they were going to have this big affair. She came and asked me if I would play for her. I said, "Yes."

I went over there to play. Now, what she didn't know was unless you see the dancer, you cannot play for that dancer. She pulled the curtain between me and the audience so they couldn't see me sitting at the piano playing for these kids. I got up and walked out too. There was no way I was going to play and couldn't see who I was playing for. I could play for you to sing but not for you to dance. About halfway through the thing, I got up and

walked out. She tried to get me to wait. She said, "I haven't paid you."

I said, "Then, don't." I just came on home.

DR. CRAWFORD: You always found work to do, didn't you? If you needed money, you did something.

MRS. FORT: I do it now. I was at a meeting. This was year before last. Margie had a pattern in her pocketbook of a bedspread. I had some thread that I had bought for something else. I always carried my needles with me. I sat up there in the meeting and copied that and that was the spread you saw over here. I started it and in three weeks I had it finished. Elaine, you were here, weren't you,when I made that bed spread? It took me three weeks. It usually takes a month, but I made that one in three weeks.

DR. CRAWFORD: That isn't all you did. You wrote too.

MRS. FORT: Oh,yes.

DR. CRAWFORD: Published poetry?

MRS. FORT: Yes, I got a lot of that junk. One day they called and told me that my grandbaby was stillborn. A poem just sang in me. I am going to let you see it.

DR. CRAWFORD: I'd like to.

MRS. FORT: This is one I didn't write. It wrote itself. I'll read it.

DR. CRAWFORD: Very well.

MRS. FORT: "I say, 'Oh God, please bless a little boy who came to you today.

Without a chance to speak one word and yet he had

so much to say.

He never knew how red the rose, how swift the butterfly,

And yet he now knows the glory of the heaven and the sky.

Give him a chance, Dear God, to see the beauty of your face,

That he might realize the joys of his great sacrifice.

And if he starts a peeking out and pulling back the clouds to see his mother's face down here.

Lord, please let him be allowed.

And when I see the stars at night just twinkling off and on with signs of boyish mischief,

Please let him be the one,

Don't let the angels scold him, he's too new in that place.

And when I too must come up there, Lord, let him lead the way.

For I would like to see him smile and maybe take my hand and say, 'Come this way,

Come this way, Mama, to God's Holy land.'"

That just sang into me, I didn't write that on my own, you know. I was crying about the baby and that just came.

DR. CRAWFORD: That is a touching poem. Did you feel that way about all your poems? You felt when you wrote?

MRS. FORT: I do feel my poems, but I think when I am writing

and the verse just comes. You don't have to think what to write, it just comes. It just does that. Nothing I have would be classic because I just write.

DR. CRAWFORD: I think that is classic.

MS.KNOX: I do too.

MRS. FORT: I wrote this one: WHO IS WHO

"A little boy came out to play and all the children ran away,

We don't play with kids like you, your daddy drinks they said.

He ran inside to hide his face, his heart was sad,

His mind enraged to think that boys who refuse to play were the sons of men who sold the drinks.

The other children have moms and dads who sold tobacco, cigarettes and beer.

Who ran the ads to advertise the things that wrought his dad unwise. "

That happened.

MS. KNOX: Was that a little boy you knew?

DR. CRAWFORD: You have a lesson to teach in your poems.

MRS. FORT: I tried to get my poems published and I couldn't.

Here is one I wrote: RIDDLE OF LIFE

"A ship of life sailed into port bringing passengers one, two, three.

Williams Jr., Annette, June, Laverne for my joy and ecstasy.

One day the ship of death embarked carrying passenger number one.

But Annette had given me Robert so I was not without a son.

A joyous fate had brought Melvin, I love him as my own,

Death had taken my first born, yet it left me with two sons."

And that was Robert and Melvin, my husband's son. He was born when my husband was sixteen. So I have Melvin and Robert. I still have two boys.

DR. CRAWFORD: What are you going to do with your poems?

MRS. FORT: I don't know. I tried to get them published once. A lady came and typed them up and she carried them and she said she couldn't do anything about it.

DR. CRAWFORD: They should be kept some way so people could enjoy them in the future.

MRS. FORT: I wish they could be. I was trying to find the one I wrote about. Here's one I wrote:

"Do you wonder why I gather roses from the bush?

And place them inside where they die,

When they look so beautiful blooming splendidly,

Why do I carry them inside?

I love to hold the beauties in my arms with their perfume rare,

And taking them inside has done my room no harm.

Do you notice the room looks brighter, and the fragrance seems so sweet,

The roses were glad to come inside,

So tomorrow I shall repeat."

(Laughter)

I just write that junk. It comes to me and I just write it down.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, it isn't junk, Mrs. Fort. It sounds good to me. I hope you have someone keep them so they can be enjoyed by other people for a long time.

MRS. FORT: I hope so.

DR. CRAWFORD: You put a lot of feeling into them. I believe you've put a lot of feeling into everything you've done.

MRS. FORT: I wrote this one about tomorrow.

"Maybe when the rain is over and clouds have left the sky,
Where all the bright tomorrows are winking sunlit eyes,
The world will seem different and man shall turn to God,
And thank Him for each blessing and giving Him honor and love,
We shall learn to pray thanksgivings not begging God to give,
Then He can bestow countless blessings and in Him we shall live."

You know, I think when we pray we'll say "Give me so and so," or "Lord, please let me get this." And I think we should say, "Lord, I thank you for what you did give."

DR. CRAWFORD: You have had a lot to be thankful for, haven't you?

MRS. FORT: I'm still thankful. I'm still thinking and thinking of when my kids were little. I had them singing, "count your blessings." They were two, four and six. They did that at a place where they could count their blessings. They each had to tell what blessing they had received and they had to sing it in that song. I wrote the song that they sang otherwise with that. "Count your Blessings" was already a song. Then they sang their blessings. It made them understand that they had been blessed. All this junk is stuff that I wrote at various times. This is music:

"The cricket and the mocking bird made up a song
one day to seranade the earth and sky,
Every night and day the cadydid and the July fly
said, 'You cannot monopolize.'
So they chattered long and loud and would not
apologize,
The bumble bee hummed contentedly, the owl laughed
"Who who wee."
When winter comes, they all will run.
Who will then join the jamboree."

It is just stuff I do.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you ever draw or paint, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: I have drawn flies, you know, if I go out to eat something, flies will come. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: You have done everything else. It wouldn't surprise me if you had done that.

MRS. FORT: The drawing I do is not terrific. Nobody wants to see it but me. And I don't want to look at it after it is finished. My children could look at you and draw you just as you are, but not me. They had to do it in school. I didn't have to do it. I cannot draw.

DR. CRAWFORD: Can I ask you something about schools, Mrs. Fort? You have seen them in Memphis a long time. Do you think they have changed very much?

MRS. FORT: Yes, the teachers are not teaching. They have changed drastically. Because when I went to school you couldn't get up and cut up and go out of the room and make a lot of noise. You couldn't do that. You had to get your mind on those books. You had to study. If not, you were punished or a note was sent home to your parents. Now, the child doesn't learn, he is bad and he cuts up and the parent comes over and tells the teacher what she better not do to her child. I had that happen to me in Arkansas.

I had an orange one day. I was trying to teach the children about the world. I mean you take these children who had never had that kind of education and they don't know what the world is. They are just living on the ground, you know. I took an orange and I said, "I'm going to show you what the world looks like." So I cut that orange in half and held them apart. I said, "This is the eastern hemisphere and this is the western hemisphere. I said,"Are you listening?"

A little boy said, "Go on with your tale."

I said, "This is not a tale. This is the truth." And I

said, "Just imagine that juice was coming out of this orange all around and this is the oceans that go around the world. " So we went along with the lesson . That next day, and people laugh when I tell this, but it really happened. A great big woman, who had on some red sandals and a long blue skirt, a yellow blouse, and a red hat with a black veil that came way down. She was dressed and got all this from the catalog. She came in and she had a stick in her hand. She said, "What do you mean teaching my child that the world is an orange!" (laughter) She was so big over me. "You told my boy that lie. The other day you told him he was an African and my boy is in Arkansas and don't you tell him nothing else different, because that is what he is." (Laughter)

The principal happened to step in and asked what was wrong. "This woman lied to my child and told him the world was an orange. And any child knows better than that. My child come home and told me that mess and I told him I'd kill him if he came up with it again."

I told the principal I was going to have a P.T.A. meeting. This is something they had never had. We gave every child a note that read: "Have your parents here Friday night."

I had the professor to get a map of every country he could. I had them around on the board and I had people from those different countries by those maps. I am going to educate somebody before I get beat to death. (Laughter) When they came in that night we served dinner and everything. Then I got up and I said, "I look good. I got this leather suit from Sears and Roebuck. My shoes are leather and matching and everything I have on is

matching." I was talking about her outfit. I said, "When you buy from the Sears Roebuck catalog, you know they have the toilets with a sack in the back and a sack in the front and a Sears and Roebuck catalog hanging inside. When you are out looking in your Sears and Roebuck catalog and you see something you like, buy it that looks like the model that it is on and not from two or three different models." Professor said,"Mrs. Fort, suppose one wants to buy from Sears--one thing from Sears and another from this other store--if you buy something brown from Sears buy something brown from this other store to go with it. Don't mix and mess it up. "

Then I started on the maps and I said, "Here is a map of Italy. Do you see this man? He lives in Italy and he is Italian. I said, "The man down there on the corner, up in Osceola, he is Italian and he looks like this man here and he came from this country."

I told them all around. "Now, this is Africa. We came from Africa. I told them why we came, when and how. We look like this." This woman told me her little boy was somebody's son that lived downtown. If he had heard you, he would beat you half to death. Then I said,"If you brought that Italian here and your son is his son, your son is a mixture and he can look like either one of you, but you are what you are. Never say you are what you eat. If you eat garlic, you're half Italian. (Laughter) If you eat greens and corn, you are half black." After I got through explaining, her husband, who was a minister got up and said, "Mrs. Fort, I really love this. I didn't know that. I thought my mama

brought me here."

No, that man's people and some other people brought you here to make a living for him so he could be lazy and do nothing and you would have to do all the work. Now that you have learned how to work without him, now that you have learned that you can work and buy your own property, get off of this plantation. I was telling them a lot. I didn't know the superintendent and another man were there. I said, "Get off of this plantation. Get you a place--some place else--and work and make a living, buy a home, build a decent house." And I had some pictures of decent houses. I told them to buy a house because this man is not going to have you here long. He's got a machine out here. I showed it to the children. It digs up the old corn and cotton in front and it grinds it up and all the stuff falls down in and then it plants with the man in the back and two men running this machine. I said, "In a few years he is going to have a machine that will pick the cotton." One man said, "That is a lie. That is never going to happen, Mrs. Fort." You watch it.

DR. CRAWFORD: You were right about that.

MRS. FORT: I say, "Get an education," and I told the children to study law, study to be doctors and pharmacists. I told them how to go about it. I say, "Stop going to town on Fridays and standing on the street and looking up and down the street, you get nothing out of it. If you are not going to buy anything, don't go to town. Stay at home." I just explained a lot of stuff to them.

When the meeting was over, the Superintendent got up and I

was outdone. Do you know he raised my salary $50.00!

DR. CRAWFORD: My goodness.

MRS. FORT: He really did. He said, "I wish you could teach my children, but you can't do that. "

I said, "I don't have to."

He said, "You are doing a good job here." And my check came out $50 more.

DR. CRAWFORD: That's wonderful,and it is better than being beaten with a stick.

MRS. FORT: That woman was mad. If the Principal hadn't come in she was going to whip me with that stick, she thought. (Laughter) You know when you don't know and people don't hold you responsible for your ignorance, they are supposed to teach you from that. You don't get mad because a person does not know.

DR. CRAWFORD: So you decided to teach the older people as well.

MRS. FORT: And I did. We had classes after that. I would call them in once a month and we would have classes until I left. And when I left, they wanted me to come back. I didn't go back down there because you had people who were mean. They wouldn't believe you if they saw it, you know. This doesn't happen. You had to explain to them where they came from because if you don't know where you came from or where you have been or where you are going, you don't know how to go any place.

One lady got after me because I told her little boy that you had to learn geography to know where you are. I said, "The postman has to learn where to carry your mail to your mother."

You see his mother lived some place in Michigan and he could not say it. When the real mother left they were small. I imagine somebody said, "San Francisco, California. Now, here these kids are fifteen and sixteen years old, in the third and fourth grade, and I said, "Where is your mother?'

And they would say, "San Francisco, Catchiefarchie. " Big children and they thought this was the name of the place! So I was trying to teach them geography. I loved geography. I was trying to teach geography.

I would tell the class. I would write these words on the board: San Francisco, California. And we would have to say it. And then I would get a song and we would sing it about San Francisco, California. This little boy whose mother lived in Inkston, Michigan. We would sing a song about Inkston, Michigan. We would make a parody of it. This lady came and said, "You ain't making fun of where my daughter lives." You know, but now I couldn't blame her. She's been there all of her life on that farm. She hadn't ever been off. To say she hadn't been any further than Osceola, Arkansas, from near Blytheville--no further than Osceola--on the farm everyday. And she says her children have to work and I want his passing card out of here because he can't sit up in that building.

I told her he had not passed. This brought anger. Then I sat with her one day and I hugged her and explained to her. If I hadn't hugged her, she might have hit me. (Laughter) I explained to her the whole thing. It took me about two hours. School is out and I am sitting there talking to her all this time and it was

getting dark. Because the Principal had gone up to Bytheville to get some things, and we were going to wait till he got back so he could take us home.

I was sitting there talking and she said, "Why haven't you told me this mess befo?" You know she said, "this mess befo?" One of the ladies sitting there with me laughed. I said, "What are you laughing about? [And she answered] "Libby saying 'this mess'".

I said, "If you were in her circumstances, it would be worse than a mess to you, because she hasn't had a chance." While we were sitting there talking, a man down below us who had some cows--he had a big farm and some cows--he came by and said to me, "You'nce been here a long time." I had not heard that word before in my life. I thought he was talking about a person.

I said, "I don't know You'nce."

He said, "I'm talking about you'nce. How long you'nce been here?" And this was a white person. I didn't laugh at the man. This was his way of speaking and in that part of the country. Then his wife came on and said, "Have my good man been here?" In some terms "my good man", would be a bad term. These people were speaking like this and this was their way of expressing themselves. But you have to know that. I just said, "Yes, he has gone now. He came and is gone now. He asked me if we had been here a long time." And I said, "I really didn't understand him at first." This woman who was sitting beside me was laughing. She's spoiling out. "You hear dat you'nce!" I heard that too.

I can't laugh because I make mistakes. I wouldn't want anybody to laugh at me. Teach me and we have got to teach each

other before the climax comes. We'd better teach each other if we want a good climax to pass. I don't know it all. You don't know it all. We got to try to learn. What I learn, I'll tell you and you tell me. We have to do it without malice or forethought as my father used to say. We have to do it without malice. I must teach you. You must teach me and afterwhile when we know, there'll be peace because God said that before the end of time that we are going to have that peace--lion will lie down with the lamb. He said, "a little child"; he didn't say a grown person, did he! That's why I love children because a little child is going to lead us. The kingdom of heaven is going to be little children. You have to come as a little child to enter. So we have to love the little children.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have spent your life teaching people and learning from them.

MRS. FORT: I learn more than I teach.

DR. CRAWFORD: I don't know about that.

MRS. FORT: Yes, I learn more than I teach. I enjoy people and they tell me a whole lot.

DR. CRAWFORD: I suppose our tape is about over for today. Thank you very much for it.

THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS "MEMPHIS BLACK HISTORY." THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MRS. MARIE FORT. THE DATE IS SEPTEMBER 20, 1989 AND THE PLACE IS MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS BY MS. ANN KNOX. PRESENT ALSO IS CHARLES W. CRAWFORD. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW IV.

MS.KNOX: Marie, tell us about what you are going to do to train these little boys to be gentlemen.

MRS. FORT: Well, Monday morning I went to the door and I saw two boys over there in the park at 11 o'clock in the day. I walked out and said, "Come here." And they came over and I said, "Who are you?"

This little boy told me and I said, "How old are you?

He said, "Seventeen." The other one said, "I'm eleven.

I said, "What are you doing over there?"

They said, "We missed the bus."

I said, "Why?"

They said, "Well, we just couldn't get up early enough."

I told them if they didn't know where they came from, you don't know where you are, and you don't know where you are going, so we are going to get together and learn this.

DR. CRAWFORD: They are coming to your home this afternoon.

MRS. FORT: They are going to be here this afternoon and bring some more boys. We are going to get together on it. They signed their names here. There they are.

MS. KNOX: They sure did. One is 17 and one is 11. Tell us

what you are going to tell these boys.

MRS. FORT: The first thing I am going to teach them is about the beginning of man because you don't know whether the chicken or the egg came first. But I am going to tell them that man came first. Since man has been here so long, man needs to learn to adjust himself to who and what he is. That's the first thing I am going to teach them. I told them some of it the other day. I said, "Now, to be a man, you've got to go to school and learn because if you don't know how to read, you don't know what I am talking about. You don't know what man means. " I said, "It doesn't mean a boy growing up. It means somebody with knowledge to keep the world going. I would hate for somebody like you to keep the world going for me."

This little boy said, "Yes, ma'am."

I said, "What I want you to do is get some more boys and come to my house Wednesday evening at three and we are going to learn to be men.

This little boy said, "We are going to learn?"

I said, "Yes, you and I are going to learn to be men." I said, "Just put 'wo' on to man. That's woman. And you are going to be 'man.'" They seemed to be very glad. They sat there for about an hour listening. I told the oldest one that you are a chairman and the next one is vice chairman and you bring these people on. I've done it several times. Those whom I've trained seemed to understand.

MS. KNOX: That is wonderful.

MRS. FORT: I took a lot of boys out of the street and taught

them to sing. We were going to Ed Sullivan, but when my husband--my husband paid the fifty dollars to the lawyer--and the man from Ed Sullivan came down and listened to them. Do you know, not a mother would give us a nickel! You know we couldn't pay their fare. You had to go yourself. Nobody would give me a dime. I sold chicken dinners and bought their costumes and all. But nobody would give me a nickel. So they didn't go. They missed a big chance because, you see, Ed Sullivan sent the man down here to look for talent. They took my boys. They were wonderful. They were called "The Vollintinos" because they lived on Vollintine.

They sang so beautifully. I carried them all around. People would hear them sing. I taught them to write songs. One boy wrote the song about "Slumpity Slump",and they made a dance called the "Slumpity Slump" and they would do it. People went just wild when they would do that. When he says, "I'm gonna"-- and then they all say, "Slumpity Slump". Then they start doing it. People would just go wild over them. I taught them stuff like that.

MS. KNOX: Do you remember any of the boys who were in that group?

MRS. FORT: Yes, there was Herbert. You know, I am bad on names. There was Herbert, and Vernon King. Mattie Warren had two boys in it. The tenor was a man named Quincy Jones. There is a man by that name now, writing music. But he stayed right over here on the next street. His mother and I grew up together.

MS. KNOX: Do you remember any of the other songs that were

part of their show?

MRS. FORT: Oh, I taught them songs. I just taught them different songs. That was one song that they made themselves.

MS. KNOX: Were they going to sing that when they went to Ed Sullivan or were they going to do something else?

MRS. FORT: Yes, they were going to do that especially as a funny song. Then they were going to sing the others. They did a lot of classics. If you had heard them, one man said, "I just can't believe these kids are doing this!" But I taught them to sing classics and all like that. Learn everything. They enjoyed it and I did too, but we would have a crowd right out there listening. They'd say, "Come on, The Vollintinos are back here in Mrs. Fort's yard." They would just crowd in here to hear those kids sing.

MS. KNOX: Tell us about the costumes that you made for them.

MRS. FORT: They were tuxedos. They were black tuxedos with a red cummerbund and white shirts. We sold dinners and got everybody some black shoes so that they would be just alike. Not anyone--not one mother--would come to hear them or give them a nickel or anything. My husband said, "I'm through. I'm not going to give anymore." We didn't go. I was ready to go and I had a pass. I could go to New York. I still have it, but they couldn't go unless they had the money. Well, I couldn't get the money either.

But I appreciated those kids. One is a minister now--Charles Walker was his name. His brother is a minister and one boy comes

here from California on Mother's Day every year. I can't think of his name.

MS. KNOX: He always comes to visit you, I bet.

MRS. FORT: Yes, he comes to see his people and then he'll come and visit me. Then, another little boy who lives in New York, his mother used to stay right down the street here. She used to rent from my sister. He comes once a year. When he comes to see his mother, he comes over to see me too. But they all call me "Mama Fort." I'm the Mama.

MS. KNOX: I wonder if I could ask you about somebody else too? I believe you may have taught--Julian Bolton. Was he one of yours?

MRS. FORT: That was one of my boys. In fact, his mother and his aunt were here constantly to parties for the kids.

MS. KNOX: Oh really!

DR. CRAWFORD: Two generations.

MRS. FORT: Well, a lot of them are like that. They grew up and sent their kids. So it was all right with me. I wasn't as old as they were, so I could do it. But they would send their kids to me and people even last year said, "Can you teach my child to dance?"

I said, "No, I cannot, not now." You know the dancing that they are doing is what we did years ago. They know that so it is no need to try to teach them that, but I would like to have another review on a stage. We had it three years ago with the Christian Children's Sports and Culture Association over here at Sacred Heart Church in the basement. We gave two big programs

down there. We had a whole big stage review. It was nice.

MS. KNOX: Tell us about Julian. Tell us about what you remember working with him as a kid?

MRS. FORT: Well, he was very smart always and was never bad. You know most kids will do something and you got to say, "Stop that." You never did have to tell him. He was looking at you, you know. I think he was afraid to do anything wrong for fear something might happen. So you just didn't have to holler at him. If you said sing, he was ready to sing. If you said dance, he was ready to dance. He was just that kind of child. He is that kind of man.

I've met him in so many places and I said, "Julian, you get up and tell them about so and so." He'd get right up. He's the same kind of man that he was as a child.

And Sandridge was one of mine. I reared his mother and her four sisters. They would come every day. I didn't take care of them, but they were here every day and I taught them to dance and put them on programs and then here comes Sandridge later. He's one of mine too. I don't know any that didn't do well but Ricky Peete. He is not mine. He never was mine.

MS. KNOX: Do you remember him as a boy?

MRS. FORT: No, but when I saw him, he was grown doing things wrong. The first time I ever saw him, I was telling him what he was doing wrong, so he didn't matter.

MS. KNOX: Let me ask about another entertainer. Did you know Alberta Hunter?

MRS. FORT: Did I! Do you know at St Anthony's School at that

time, I was studying pedagogy. One of the sisters was nice enough to help me with it. Alberta, I think she was going to grade school. I don't know where. She would come over at our social hour. That girl could sing--she could outsing a mockingbird. Somebody said she could play the piano. She did. There was a song, "Wearing Patches." She would play it and she and I would sing it. The sisters would come in and just have a fit. One sister said, "Sing that "Raggedy Boy" again. You know how nuns are. She didn't get it right. Sing about that raggedy boy again. That was the song "Wearing Patches". But she would come over and just about every day at that social hour between 11 and 12. We would sing.

She was tall and slender and very good natured. She was not a mean person. You could get along nicely with her. When she came here, once I called--I've forgotten who I called now. They told me where to find her. I called her. She said she was coming out here as soon as she could get someone to bring her, but she didn't find anyone I don't guess. She didn't come.

MS. KNOX: When she came back, where did she perform?

MRS. FORT: I don't know because I never went to hear her except once she sang on Mud Island and she could sing that till tomorrow and I would not be there. I am afraid of the river. I was there once, but I'll never go back again. But Mrs. Sue Miles called me and told me to be sure and be there. You know I work with the neighborhood centers. We were having this--what do you call it-- Memphis in May. I went, but I'll never go again. I don't care what they put--if they put diamonds over there--I'll never be there. I was trembling all day. My pressure

went up. The nurse took my pressure and said you need to go home and go to bed. My pressure went up from fright--purely fright. I am afraid of the river. I fell in there when I was nine.

MS. KNOX: That certainly explains it. How did that happen?

MRS. FORT: My father took me fishing. We used to go fishing all the time. I was crazy about crawfish. I thought I saw one in the water and I reached over to get it, I went in. What I remembered later was a great big fat man with a khaki suit on. When I looked he was rolling me over and I was vomiting. Then, I was wet and my father said he put his coat over me and took my clothes off and there was a little tree and he hung my things on the tree and I went to sleep. When I woke up, I woke up screaming just remembering the river. I don't go near the water. The only water I've been in since then was the Gulf of Mexico. They put me in that down in Tampa, Florida. I just don't like water unless I am taking a bath. I don't drink water.

DR. CRAWFORD: Almost drowning would make anyone feel that way.

MRS. FORT: I know. It was a horrible feeling. I just don't go near any kind of water if I can get around it. I like pictures of water. I'll look at that, but I don't want to see the real thing.

Once in the hospital the doctor said, "Why don't you drink this water?" I said that I was afraid of water. (Laughter) I am afraid I will fall in the glass and take a bath.

MS.KNOX: You mentioned Tampa. It sounds like you have traveled a lot.

MRS. FORT: I've been all over. But my granddaughter was living in Tampa--the one who is with me here now. She had brought her children home for us to see and I got on a plane one night and in an hour I was in her house with those two kids. It was just lovely down there.

One thing I heard Ricky Peete say, "That God is not through with me yet." I brought this to the group that we had, because on the streets in Tampa there are great big signs almost as big as that wall in there. There was a sign that said, "Please be patient with me, God is not finished with me yet." I came back and told them what I had seen and heard. Everything he hears you say, he is going to repeat that somewhere. He makes it as though he is saying a big speech. I used to tell him to stop making those Martin Luther King speeches (laughter) because that is what he does.

MS. KNOX: Are you talking about Ricky Peete?

MRS. FORT: Yes. He accused me of asking him for money in a crowd. He came to my house that morning at 1:30 trying to get the money from me that the different priests in the city had given me for the children. I wouldn't give it to him. So the next night when I went to the meeting, he stood up before the crowd and said, "She came to me and asked for money, and I didn't give it to her and I had to throw her out of this organization." And some people had little enough sense to believe that! I told him last year, "Nixon's dirty tricks people went to the pen. Where are you going and when?" There's a lady who will tell you that is just what I said to him up there where they were

voting, you know. That is just what I asked him because he continues to do that. Some people claim that they think he is real. He is a phoney from his feet up. At least maybe, I feel it because he hurt me. A lady said, "You've got to forgive him."

I said, "Look, God drowned a lot of people for being sinful, and I don't have to forgive that." There is so much you forgive and so much you just don't take anymore.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have always stood up for yourself, haven't you?

MRS. FORT: I've always had to. That is the only way you can live. That is the only way you can make it is to stand up for yourself and others.

MS.KNOX: Is that one of the things you will tell the boys this afternoon?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes. I tell all kids that. How can you be a man or a woman without standing up? There are some things when I was a kid I wanted to be--a wife and mother. That was one thing that preyed on my mind--be a wife and mother. Then, I wanted to sew. In fact, everything I wanted to do I have done, but one. I wanted to go to Africa. I never made it. But that was one thing that I thought last year. I was saving money last year and I had to spend it, but that is the one thing I wanted was to go to Africa. I saw Dick Hackett and Brenda Woods. I said, "I wish I was standing on that soil right now." I wanted to stand there so bad. I never will get the opportunity, but I sure wanted to. In fact, that was just one of my desires that was never completed.

DR. CRAWFORD: You have done so many things, Mrs. Fort, but there

are always some that are still a part of your dream, I believe.

MRS. FORT: Well, yes. I've got dreams of things that she (Sue) and I are doing for children. I thought we couldn't do it, but thank God we found a way. I talked to a man the other day and he is going to see about getting us a bus to go to the home of Alex Haley.

MS. KNOX: Oh, that is wonderful.

MRS. FORT: She and I and Margie had been trying to get that money together, but when I talked to him the other day he said, "When you get ready to go just let me know. So you gather up whatever you can, and I'll see if we can't get the rest." So we'll get some pennies and dimes and quarters and we have got to feed the kids too. So we are going to do that.

MS. KNOX: Do you have other dreams that you and Sue have for the kids?

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, we have a lot of things. We are going to teach them a lot of things about culture, music and I want to teach them something about the Bible. You see, we took prayer out of the schools. Well, you put in dope, lying, stealing and everything else that is unGodly because you took God out. It seems that people don't understand that. If God is not there, then who is?--the person against God and that is the devil. You know we have devil worshippers all over Memphis and every place else. In the churches even. I am trying to teach them away from that. You are going to get one out of every ten. You may earn one. See, you can't say I am going to get the whole group, but

you are going to get one out of ten and that one is going to get some more.

You plant one seed of corn. It is going to grow up and there are a lot of stalks of corn on there and each one of them you can plant seed from each one. Look how many millions of grains you are going to get later. So I think if we just save one, and I know we can save one. We are trying hard.

I wanted to write a book. I've been writing on that book since 1930 and I haven't gotten that book written yet.

DR. CRAWFORD: What would it be about, Mrs. Fort?

MRS. FORT: I wanted to write the book about my life and things that I saw, things that happened, the funny things, the good things, the bad things. I wanted to write it all.

What started me, I was teaching in Arkansas and when I got off the train, this lady who carried the mail would pick me up and take me down to the school because it was a long way down from the train to the school. Well, that morning when I got off the train here is a woman with one of these great big wide coats. Do you remember when they used to have the stripes going on in. She was trying to get the train, but what she did, she threw her bag in the baggage car and she hung up there.(Laughter) They had to pull her in through there and the train was moving and she was swinging back and forth like this. I got to school and told the kids about it. After that every morning when I would get there, they would say, "What happened this morning?" (Laughter) I thought that was the funniest thing. You know she was just swinging. The conductor was on the ground hollering and laughing and the train

was moving and they were pulling her up through the mail window.

MS. KNOX: Were there any special things that you wanted for sure to be in your book?

MRS. FORT: I wanted to have things about my children--what they did and how they danced and how they sang and what they did when they got up grown. I wanted all of that in my book. I wanted every kid to sign it. I can't find all my kids. Now and then I will see one, you know. I'd like to get them all together and have a big dinner, but I never could find them all. One will come and call me and say, "Mrs. Fort, we are in the city now and we are going to get together and do what you wanted done." Before we could get hold of the others these would be gone. They would have to go back and we just didn't get to do it. I wish it could happen. Quite a few of them died. And their parents too. That will never be, but one day I'll find some.

DR. CRAWFORD: I hope you will not give up that dream about a book Mrs. Fort. The things you are telling us we will have for you. You will have a copy of this tape if you want it. All the things you are saying here, you could tape since it is part of your life story and put it in your book.

MRS. FORT: But I can't write. You know when I start then, this is too long I can't write all this, I can't do that and I give it up.

DR. CRAWFORD: You are speaking part of it now, and you are not having to write in what you tell us.

MRS. FORT: Well, maybe this will go in a book. Then, I have some things here I want you to see--some of the

awards I have received. I was Mrs. Senior American in 1979. I have that trophy in there and my crown and all that stuff.

MS. KNOX: When did you receive that award?

MRS. FORT: At the Tri-State Fair. This is another funny thing. They didn't have but one blue bird in it. I won. The other night when this girl won, this girl named Elnora called me and said, "Didn't you cry to see that girl win?"

I said, "I knew she could, because I won once in a big contest like that." There were a lot of people in it, but I won. So she could win too. I told my great granddaughter last night that I want you to be Miss America. I'll be dead, but I want you to do it. You can.

She says, "But I'm not pretty."

I said, "Don't tell me, I have anything ugly. I said my mother said she didn't, and I was the worst looking thing anybody ever saw, and my mother thought I was pretty, so you're pretty to your grandmother." Everybody is pretty to their own folks regardless of how they look. I want her to be Miss America one day. Maybe not in that pageant, but in character.

MS. KNOX: What other awards do you have? You mentioned the Senior American.

MRS. FORT: That wall is full right there. The wall in my bed room is full and I have some things in there on my bed full of awards that I have received. I don't know how many.

MS. KNOX: I know they are all very precious to you. Is there one that seems to have the most meaning of all to you?

MRS. FORT: Yes, there is one. I received an award for being the mother of the year and a lady from some place in Chicago took it and she said this is what I wanted to be. I had never met the lady before, but she said this is what I wanted and she took it. I couldn't just fight with her. She and her husband went out there and got in their car and she drove off. She took that and two other awards that I had. That's that. I couldn't get it back.

Ms. KNOX: I've got a couple of other names on the list that we wanted to be sure and ask you about while we are here today. Katie Sexton--you've mentioned her.

MRS. FORT: Oh my, Lord, I reared her two children--really reared them. I fed them, took care of them, bought clothes for them all their lives until they got grown. Katie Sexton lived right back here, right back of me. She had four children. Her oldest boy would come over the fence every Friday to eat fish and spaghetti. That's what we had for dinner. He did that until after he moved to Chicago. After he moved to Chicago he would still come home and come over on Friday. He would always come in the back door. "Is the spaghetti ready?" (Laughter) The other two--Katie was gone all the time--she was seldom home. Those kids stayed with me. I am their mother. I even went to New York to see them when they moved to New York. I went up there to see them. They're mine.

MS. KNOX: When they went up there, did they want you to cook spaghetti?

MRS. FORT: No, I was in a hotel. I was in the Americana Hotel.

They would come up there to see me. Then, one sent a cab to bring me over to Brooklyn to visit her. That was Georgia Mae. I went over there and spent one whole day, but I had to come back, you know, to get back home. It was joyful to see them progressing there.

MS. KNOX: Katie was a special friend of yours?

MRS. FORT: Yes, I put Katie and Alma Morris in politics.

MS. KNOX: Tell us about that.

MRS. FORT: One day I had the children dancing, and Katie came over and she said, "You are going to have to see after them because I am leaving. I won't get home until late." My husband said the civic club is meeting around there at the church and won't you go around there with us tonight? She said, "I don't know, I guess I will." So that night she came back and we went around there to the Civic Club meeting. Katie Sexton never missed another Civic Club meeting. Anything political she was there and was the finest in it. Whatever you started then, Katie Sexton was there. I taught her arithmetic and some other things--to read some things that she couldn't. She was just the best person anywhere in anything. She excelled.

Politically, everybody loved her because if you say, "Katie, can you get me some people?" And she would say, "Mrs. Fort, give me your list." (Laughter) I would give her my list and she started that Democratic Club down south here with the people I had on my list for the March of Dimes. You know, I was March of Dimes president 35 years even until Mr. Nellis came.

I was the chairman. I would raise a lot of money. My

fashion show would sometimes bring in $2,000. I would give this fashion show every year at the Hotel Men's Improvement Club. During the Mother's March I would get a captain on each street. That captain would have people walking. They'd bring the money to her. She would call me and tell me how much she had and then, she would call the policeman and the policeman would get the money and take it in. One lady said to me one day, "How much of that money did you keep?" I said, "That's my captain's." Because I never touched it. I didn't go to their house to count it. I just simply gave to the March of Dimes and wrote what they said they had. Then, I would present my list to Mr. Nellis. That did it.

I did that 35 years.

MS.KNOX: That is a long time.

MRS. FORT: I loved it. I would give this big show--my dance school would dance, my son's band would play. It would be full of people. I would charge every store five dollars to put in a model and this model would show that store's clothing. Sometimes, they would want to put in three or four models. That would be $20. You know there is a lot of money there. Any business that wanted to put in a model would have to pay five dollars to put the model in the show and we would put on this big fashion show every year.

A lady lived in Chicago and she used to dress her little daughter like Jackie Kennedy. She would make these clothes and she would bring that girl down to be in the show every year. One year coming down, they didn't get here and I wondered why the girl hadn't come because we were going to make her queen of fashions.

They got burned up on the way--had a big wreck somewhere. Her uncle wrote and told me what happened. I went back to try to find some of her people after that. I couldn't even find the uncle when I went back. But he did call me and he told me that is what happened.

That ended my fashion show.

MS. KNOX: Tell me about Julia Hooks?

MRS. FORT: Julia Hooks was a wonderful woman. She used to have the Juvenile Court here--she and her husband. Some boys were trying to break out one night when I was a girl, I was very young, and they killed her husband. So she gave up the Juvenile Court. Well, she was a fine musician. She trained people everywhere. She told us one night that she was in slavery, you know, and she told us how she would play on the harpsichord or something like that. She would go into the big house and she would play on it until she learned music. It seems that she trained herself.

But I was a member of the Women's Federation here. You had to be a president of a club to be a member of the city federation. I joined. They were asking different people on her--I don't know if it was her ninetieth birthday or what it was--to do a program for her. Well, you know how people are in Memphis--I guess you have heard about this. Everybody was saying, "I don't have time, and I am not going to do it." I think there was a little jealousy you know, of Julia Hooks. Well, I wasn't thought of too highly as being one of the presidents because I didn't have a lot of money. These people were the big folks down in south Memphis. They did

not do the program.

It was Friday and the president, Mrs. Green, called me and said, " You know what--these people are not going to show up for this program! What are we going to do?"

I said, "We are going to have it."

She said, "What can you do?"

I said, "I'll have your program there, don't worry. I'll have one."

I got my dance students--not all of them. I got Sandridge's mother and her sisters and my three. That was eight and we did a show with the eight notes-C,D,E,F,G,A,B,C. One would stand up and sing, "I'm C." She would sing a song consisting of that. One little girl--the baby girl--sang "Sitting on a log Petting my Dog" She had a little toy dog and a piece of wood that she was sitting on. She sang "Sitting on a Log Petting my Dog." When they got through, and each child had done its part, they sang the scale--CDEFGABC. I was playing the scale. They sang it. They said, "This is for the lady of music, Mrs. Julia Hooks." These were little kids, you know. My three and Mrs.Oakes--Alice Oates' five. It just went over big. Two young ladies whom Mrs. Hooks had taught came in and played. Oh, they played beautifully. That was the program.

She appreciated it very much because she sent me a nice letter.

MS.KNOX: Oh, that is great. It sounds as though there were some fairly wealthy families here.

MRS. FORT: Oh yes, there were.

MS. KNOX: Who were the ones who were so wealthy here? Do you remember their names of the families?

MRS. FORT: Well, no, not exactly because people thought my mother was wealthy, but we were not. Why give them this, they got everything. That's because they had a lot of property, you know. But when you have property, you are poor, because people are tearing it up every day and not paying the rent. So you are not wealthy. My children thought I was wealthy. They would say, "Mother, what are we going to give the poor children? We've got to take things for the poor children." I said, "You'd better go ask the poor children to help us."

MS.KNOX: What about B.B. King?

MRS. FORT: B.B. used to play that and he would get out there and start singing and everybody would scream and laugh and they would throw things at him. My son was a real musician. I laughed because I thought B.B. would never succeed. He was living right down here on Montgomery Street. He didn't seem to get excited over it. I think that made him study harder.

When I opened my shop down here at Alma and Jackson, he used to come in there every day and he'd bring records and things that he had made. I still didn't think he was going to do what he is doing because he was so dry about it. "One day I'll play," he said. A lot of days he is playing and playing big! I think he's wonderful because, you know, with people putting him down as they did and that made him rise above it. That is what I am going to tell these kids.

I want role models and B.B. is one.

MS. KNOX: Who would be some other role models?

MRS. FORT: Bolton, Minerva Johnican, Lois DeBerry. I think some people, though, I helped to succeed. I want them to come and talk to my kids. Then, one day we are going to take these kids to Nashville and visit the offices of these people because we know every one of them from Memphis. We know them all. We are going to take the kids there to see them and see what they are doing. Because you can't tell a kid about it, you've got to show him.

MS. KNOX: You knew Lois when she was a young child?

MRS. FORT: Well, no,not a child, but when she first ran for office, I helped. See, we couldn't work for her out here, but I sent ten of my boys out where she is and let them work for her.

DR. CRAWFORD: In her district?

MRS. FORT: Yes, in her district. Alvin King. I sent kids out there for him. You know, just to distribute literature. Yes, I've always known Walter Bailey. His people live here next door. Clara Bailey Carter was his aunt. She's dead now. All of them are dead mostly. But I knew the Baileys all my life mostly. Their father was a fine man. He was a porter on the train. Five years ago I was on the train coming from Chicago. Some ladies were saying to him, he was a good looking man, you know, and they were saying, "You've been a porter all your life. Why don't you get a good job?"

He said, "I've got two sons who are lawyers." And he went

back and got a picture of his house. He said, "Take a look at this and I got this being a porter on a train. I didn't steal it. And one lady said, "You hear him lying."

I said, "Let me tell you, you don't know me either, and he is not lying. I know the man and I know the whole family." I said, "What he says he has got, he has got and he is not telling you all of it." So one woman just turned around and mumbled something.

I said," If you want to come to Memphis sometimes, I'll show you some of his people who live next door to me."

This woman in the seat with me said, "You know him sure enough?"

I said, "Surely, I do." I do know them. I always knew them. Those Baileys are fine people. You never heard of one being in trouble or doing anything wrong. I've got some things signed in there by Walter Bailey. I am going to show you that too because I have a lot of things in there for you to see. I can't bring it all up here. I'm too young (Laughter) to carry it. But I do want you to see those things--a lot of trophies.

By the way there is a little boy named Chris Coleman. He was a little boy at Raleigh Egypt School. I was to give him a certificate and I took sick. Some of the people came here and got this, but I never got his to him and it is in there. I want Chris Coleman wherever he is now as a young man, I want him to have it. That is the time when Ricky Peete told the lie on me. I was having this contest for the children at school. "Why I Detest Crime And What I Can Do About it." I can show you some of that.

I called different priests and they were sending money. I

had around $600 and he wanted it. I didn't give it to him. That is what he did to me. I can't get over it. I'll say it is over now, but in here it hurts because I don't take anything from anybody. If it is yours, it is yours; and if it is mine, don't bother it. Let me give it to you.

MS. KNOX: Before we go let me ask you one thing and that is about the Guthrie Health Clinic. I believe you were instrumental in getting that going.

MRS. FORT: I was in New York. On one Friday night, we had to eat fish way back then being Catholic. I swallowed a fish bone. They took me to John Gaston Hospital. They wouldn't take the bone out because they said my husband made too much money. This thing was killing me. They then carried me to St. Joseph's where we couldn't go, but they carried me there. The priest said, "Go over there."

I went over there and they really tried and they couldn't get the bone. They said, "Well, take her over to the Ear, Eye, Nose and Throat Clinic." We went over there and there was a doctor there who said, "I can't get it out here tonight, but Monday morning, be at my office." It was right over here by Methodist Hospital.

Well, I suffered until Monday morning. I went over there,and I was there at nine o'clock. He had patients in his office and sometimes the patients would leave and there would be about one or two in there. He had me sitting in a little cubby hole. I sat back there until five that afternoon. This doctor took the bone out of my throat and gave me some lozenges. My throat was swollen

closed. I couldn't eat anything. I couldn't drink anything. I was just in a bad shape.

Well, that January I was sent to New York by War on Poverty. On the way there, Katie Sexton carried me to the airport. I told her when I got back, I said I wanted a club started in our area. And she said, "All right."

I went on and there was a man and this was a (garbled) was there. I was at the Americana Hotel. A man would come into our meetings and into every seminar we had, he would come in there cursing. He would use a lot of profanity. I abhor that kind of stuff. People would watch me. I don't know why they were just watching me. I would look at him. So one day I said, "Look, get up and go outside. There is a rest room right around that corner. Go in there with your garbage."

He had on sandals, you know, and an old shirt. This woman said, "You don't like what he is saying, do you?"

I said, "No, I don't like it, do you?"

She said, "I just wanted to know what you were going to say." We were there a week now. Every meeting he would come in with all of this filth. So we would meet across the street to the other hotel--I've forgotten the name of it--but people over there dressed like George Washington. Do you know what that hotel is?

DR. CRAWFORD: I don't know, Mrs. Fort.

MRS. FORT: Anyway, we would have some of the seminars over there. He came in there with that same stuff. This is on Friday. This was going to be our last day--Friday morning. When he started he said, "You are sitting around here begging folks for things, and you don't have to beg. Get up and

tell them what you want." And this lady who was asking me these questions and I didn't know that she was one of the people. She says, "Why don't you go home and start a clinic in your neighborhood since you had that bone in your throat a week."

I said, "It wasn't a week; it was four days."

She said, "Well, go home and start a clinic in your neighborhood."

I said, "All right, I will." I didn't know that I would, but she made me mad. All the way home on the plane I said, "I'm going to start that clinic."

We went to the Health Department. I've forgotten what the doctor's name was now--Dr. Lovejoy.

DR. CRAWFORD: There was a Dr. Lovejoy.

MRS. FORT: Katie Sexton and Alma Morris and I went to see him. We told him that we wanted a clinic in this neighborhood. He said to do that we'd have to get doctors to say 'yes' to our work in the clinic and he was telling us all that we had to do.

I said, "Couldn't you get the doctors since you know them?"

He said, "No, you would have to do that yourself."

I said, "Then, we'll do that." My church was up on Vollintine then. We met in the school. Father Guthrie had three doctors there. We told them what we wanted. They seemed to be very agreeable, but two of them were students,but they were going to be doctors. After we talked with them, the next meeting they brought in three or four more. Finally, they settled on building the clinic over there. Well, before that, that was called--Father

Guthrie's people had owned all that property. So they said they would name it Guthrie Clinic. One of these men was so mean. He looked at Father and said, "Not named for your grandfather, remember that!"

Father said, "I don't care whose father it is named for, just so you get the clinic."

Well, they got it and I have been in there only once. That was when they were giving those shots for flu. The shot made me so sick I had to go to a doctor. I've only been there that one time. But that is how we got the clinic.

MS. KNOX: That's all the questions that I have on my list. I wonder if Sue or Charles, do you have any other things that you wanted to ask?

DR. CRAWFORD: I don't, Mrs. Fort, but I'd like to see your certificates and awards.

MRS. FORT: Okay.

(Mrs. Fort shows to the group her awards and certificates of honor and memorabilia she has collected from projects she has promoted or participated in.)